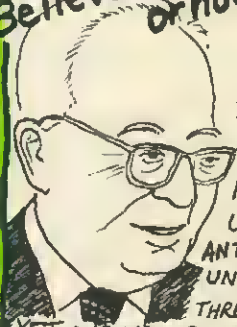


CZECHOSLOVAKIA- Believe it or not!

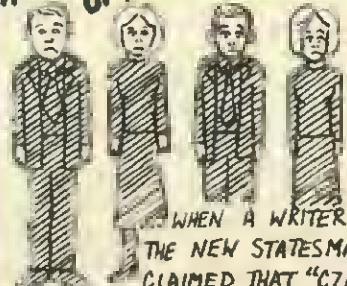
By DENVER WALKER

Believe it or not...




... FORTY-ODD YEARS AGO THIS MAN WAS A LEADER OF HIS COUNTRY'S UNDERGROUND ANTI-NAZI RESISTANCE, UNDER CONSTANT THREAT OF DEATH, YET ONE WRITER HAS CALLED HIM "A SMALL-TIME LAWYER AND PETTY PROVINCIAL POLITICIAN"!

Believe it or not...




WHEN A WRITER IN THE NEW STATESMAN CLAIMED THAT "CZECHOSLOVAKIA IS A PRISON WHERE EVEN COLOURFUL CLOTHES ARE OUTLAWED" SOME PEOPLE ACTUALLY BELIEVED THAT IT WAS TRUE!

Believe it or not...



KATOLICKÝ NOVINY
... IN A COUNTRY WITH "THE WORST TREATMENT OF RELIGIOUS BELIEVERS",
(THE TIMES), PRIESTS ARE PAID BY THE STATE, THE MAIN CATHOLIC WEEKLY HAS A CIRCULATION TWICE THAT OF BRITAIN'S, AND 200,000 BIBLES WERE PRINTED IN 1984 ALONE!

Believe it or not...



... IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA MINERS ARE PAID MORE THAN JOURNALISTS, YET RECEIVE NOTHING BUT PRAISE FROM THE MEDIA!

SEVERAL LIES EXPOSED – AND A FEW
SURPRISING TRUTHS – ABOUT THE
CZECHOSLOVAK SOCIALIST REPUBLIC

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"QUITE RIGHT, MR TROTSKY!"

CZECHOSLOVAKIA—
BELIEVE IT OR NOT!

by

Denver Walker

Cartoons and montages by Dino

Harney and Jones
119/121 Falcon Road, London, SW11 2PQ
August, 1986

Printed by Speediprinters (TU), London SW15 2RZ

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Introduction

Neville Chamberlain didn't exactly describe Czechoslovakia in 1938 as "a faraway country of which we know nothing", any more than Humphrey Bogart actually said "Play it again, Sam", but that's how it's come down to us. And while Chamberlain's description was hardly an excuse for his shameful betrayal of Czechoslovakia to Hitler, it was basically accurate, and remains so today, nearly four decades later.

Czechoslovakia, or to give it its full title, the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (CSSR), is a federal state at the very centre of Europe. It comprises two equal republics, the Czech Lands — Bohemia and Moravia — and Slovakia, with a total population of 15.5 million people and a total area of almost 128,000 square kilometres. Not a lot of people know that.

But if many people in Britain today know little or nothing about Czechoslovakia, a lot of people think they know a great deal about it. Many people would confidently describe Czechoslovakia as a grim, bleak, one-party state in Eastern Europe, without democratic rights or free trade unions. They would tell you of a country with basic necessities in short supply and consumer goods non-existent, with religion persecuted and the whole country languishing under a brutal foreign occupation and a pervasive Big Brother police state.

This same description is sometimes made, paradoxically, both by those on the right who disapprove of Czechoslovakia because it is socialist, and those on the left, or rather the Trotskyist ultra-left, whose disapproval is based on the opposite belief that it isn't—a belief based largely on ignorance of the facts.

Those who make this sort of description have usually not been to the CSSR. To borrow the words of non-communist writer John Burke in his 1976 book on Czechoslovakia, "the most implacable denigrators tend to be found among well-paid columnists and commentators who, preferring never to visit the regions from which they derive such profitable wordage, avoid having their income reduced or their outlook confused by anything so irrelevant as first-hand experience."

I have visited Czechoslovakia, some four times in the 1980s. Three of the visits were relatively brief, but in 1984 I had the experience of spending several weeks there. I was fortunate to have the assistance of the Orbis Press Agency, who made arrangements wherever possible for me to visit the places, people, organisations and institutions of my choice. No restrictions were placed on my movements: no editorial control over what I wrote was requested nor has what you read been

subjected to any form of censorship, I make this point merely because only too many people would expect the opposite to be true.

This is just the sort of misconception that I seek to clear up in the first section of this book. I aim to show that that negative picture of Czechoslovakia painted above and similar commonly-held beliefs are far from being accurate. It will soon become clear that the statements in *italic* that litter chapters 1 to 5 are not necessarily my own sentiments.

In the other chapters I seek to show that the picture put forward by anti-Czechoslovak western "experts" and self-exiled Czechoslovaks is not only wholly negative, it is woefully incomplete. We hear nothing of the positive achievements that bear comparison with the situation of Britain in the 1980s. I can make only some of those comparisons; the full picture would take volumes, and the sort of detailed statistics that most people find painfully inreadable—thus defeating their object.

Not everything I've written is from "first-hand experience"; much is necessarily taken from Czechoslovak and other sympathetic sources. But on the many occasions when I've had the opportunity to test such information in the scales of first-hand experience, I've found that I haven't been given short weight.

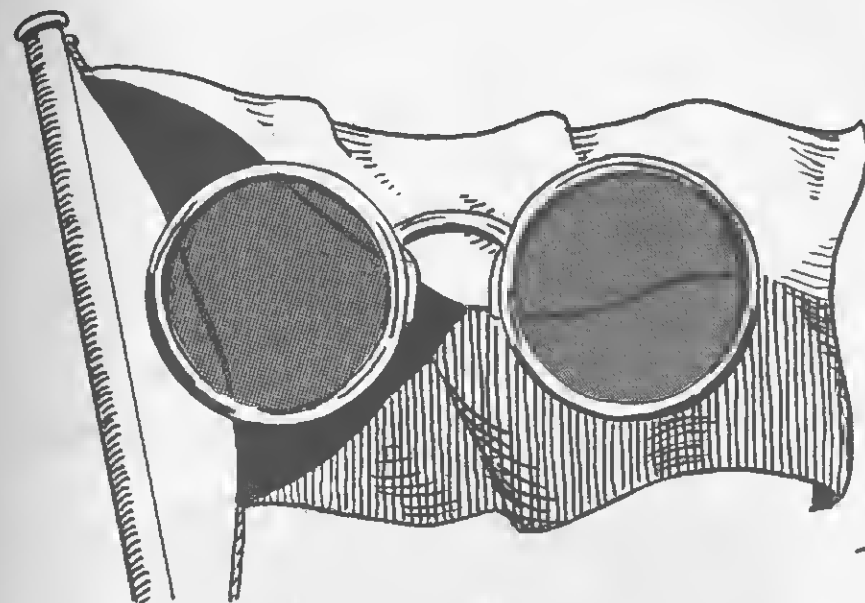
To those who read and disagree, I've got a piece of advice. I offer the same advice to those who think there may be something in what I have to say. Just three words: see for yourself. You might be surprised by what you find in Czechoslovakia, and I'm prepared to bet it'll be pleasantly.

Part One:

Removing the blinkers



*"Extraordinary weather..." comments the Good King



Chapter 1: Through grey-tinted spectacles

"... a grey and demoralised country ..."
(Editorial, *The Times*, 30 May, 1984)

Communists are often accused of seeing things in black and white. Those societies in which communists are the leading force, however, are usually described as being a combination of the two in equal proportions: grey. Grim, bleak, drab, uniform—all these are commonly used to describe socialist countries, but perhaps most common of all is "grey" (or "gray" in the US version), and Czechoslovakia is often considered the greyest of all.

This doesn't actually mean a uniform colourless coat of Dulux over everything, but it does mean absence of colour in the metaphorical sense. For people in Czechoslovakia, life is all work and no play, runs this version; they have precious little fun and their popular culture is dreary (usually meaning "not westernised enough").

Czechs and Slovaks, however, are amazed at this image of their

country and its life, and find it difficult to believe that anyone could have such a low opinion of them. It might be exaggerating to say that some people in Britain believe that people in Czechoslovakia rarely laugh or smile. Nobody's likely to be quite as daft as the actress Ayn Rand, who testified on the USSR, a country she had left more than twenty years previously, before a US Congressional Committee in 1947. Asked "Doesn't anybody smile in Russia any more?", she coolly replied, "Well . . . pretty much no."

Not many have Miss Rand's malady to such an alarming degree nowadays, but no doubt many people suffer from a milder strain of the ailment. One Czech companion of mine to whom I mentioned this outlook took great glee in regularly pointing out to me in the street people smiling and even (heaven forbid!) laughing, sometimes jokingly suggesting that the only possible explanation must be that they were foreigners on a visit.

Painting by numbers



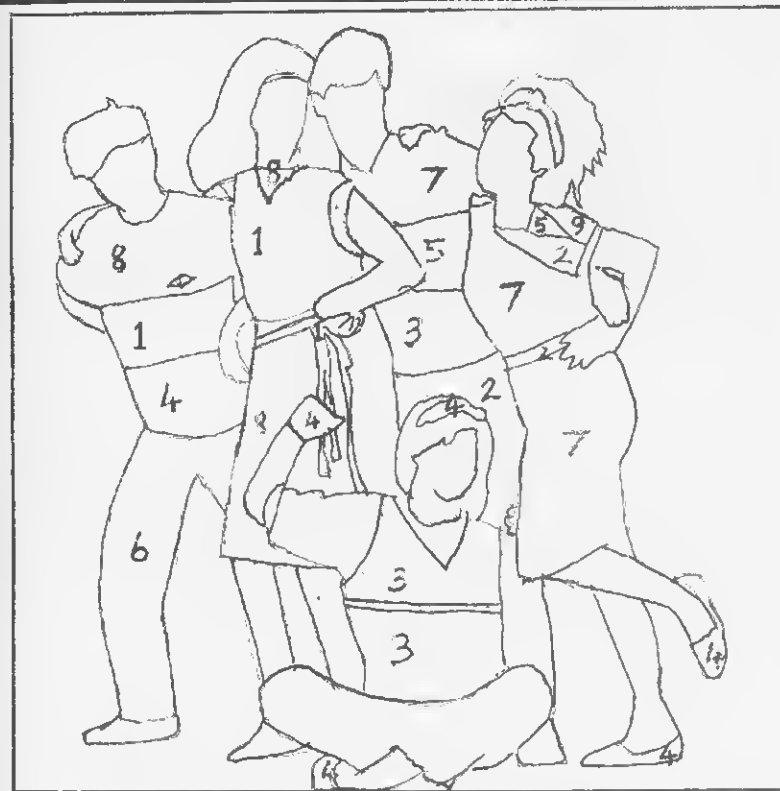
If you want to find out whether all these Czechoslovak teenagers are actually wearing grey, khaki, or olive drab, simply fill in the colours according to the simple code on the page opposite. They will then appear as they did in a recent issue of *Czechoslovak Life*

Of course people in Czechoslovakia are capable of enjoying themselves; not all the films are about heroic tractor drivers; not all the architecture fits the image of featureless blocks of flats or massive 1930s gothic wedding cakes; not all the men wear bulky overcoats, big hats and baggy trousers; not all the women are shapeless figures topped by headscarves. Anyone taken in by that image would be surprised to find just how much variety and "colour" there is in Czechoslovakia. But for some people, the greyness isn't metaphorical, it's literal.

"Czechoslovakia is a prison where even colourful clothes are outlawed (too louche)."

(Roger Lewis, New Statesman, 1 March, 1985)

If this seems to be going a bit too far, it can be pointed out in Mr Lewis's defence that he was reviewing a work of fiction—and a work of



CODE: 1 = Yellow; 2 = Turquoise; 3 = Light Blue; 4 = Red; 5 = Blue; 6 = Orange; 7 = Dark Blue; 8 = Purple; 9 = Pink

Alternatively, simply replace every colour with plain grey (if you really believe such nonsense)

fiction is a fair description of the sentence quoted. If wearing colourful clothes is "louche" (suspicious), then half or more of the Czechoslovak population must be under suspicion.

Indeed, not only are bright fashions perfectly acceptable and widespread in the CSSR, but it is their precise opposite that excites the suspicion of the Establishment in Britain, against the young victims of mass unemployment and lack of future, who react negatively (though understandably) in punk anarchism—and dress exclusively in black!

If there is any uniformity to be found in the dress of Czechoslovakia's young people, it is not in any imitation of punk fashion, but that other universal "uniform" of the western world—and increasingly of the whole world—jeans. Anyone who has any doubt over the ability of young people in Czechoslovakia to dress in a style just as casually smart—or smartly casual—as anyone else (and without resort to Oxfam shops) could do worse than check it out in the pages of *Czechoslovak Life*, the monthly magazine published (in colour, naturally) by the Orbis Press Agency. Or when satellite TV comes around, you could see the reality of that again in colour.

But if one day we'll be able to watch Czechoslovak television in Britain, will they be able to watch ours? Certainly not, according to one former Czechoslovak citizen.

"Czechoslovakia is probably the most rigid of all the Eastern European countries in keeping away Western books and newspapers, jamming radio broadcasts and operating a tight surveillance over the movement and activities of foreigners in the country."

(Vladimir Kusin, "From Dubcek to Charter 77", 1978, page 266)

I don't know why it is that some people see the measure of democracy—or for that matter culture—in socialist countries as the amount of western productions available. The developing countries of the Third World are deluged with western—largely American—TV programmes, films and publications, without noticeable benefit to their societies or cultures. This phenomenon has been dubbed "cultural imperialism" and "information imperialism", and UNESCO's attempts to overcome it have earned it the wrath of the United States, who withdrew from the organisation on allegations of political interference—allegations more applicable to the accuser.

Why shouldn't countries be granted the right to produce their own books, papers, radio and TV programmes, as well as the films and plays not mentioned by Mr Kusin? Why should they be measured by the amount of outside influence that they allow across their frontiers? Socialist Czechoslovakia has shown itself more than capable of producing its own popular culture in all fields. Yet for some people, the absence of western popular culture claimed above by Mr Kusin is just another example of Czechoslovak "greyness".

Czechoslovakia, though, produces its own pop music. Some of it might seem a little middle-of-the-road to British rock fans, though they might be surprised to find rock concerts, complete with light shows, not too different from our own, with the use of synthesizers by groups such as Prague's "OK Band". There are also "alternative" concerts of a more "new wave" variety, handbills for which are often to be seen pasted on lamp-posts around the centre of Prague. These may be "unofficial", but they certainly aren't illegal—if you're planning to commit a crime you hardly advertise the time and the venue.

There are pop programmes on both television and radio. I've watched and heard them, including a TV programme not widely distinguishable from *Top of the Pops* (though for some rock fans that would be little recommendation!). There is, true enough, no round-the-clock pop station, and as one director at Bratislava's radio station put it to me: "If someone tunes in to Bratislava, they should know that they're not on Luxembourg!" Nevertheless, there's no shortage of discos and record shops—in one of which I saw an album of what was clearly Hungarian heavy metal a phenomenon I didn't know existed! There are also regular pop festivals, such as the Bratislava Lyre festival and the Melody festival organised among the Hungarian community in Slovakia, and the regular festival of political pop and folk song in Sokolov.

Nor is there any shortage of popular feature films; Czechoslovak studios produce about eighty per year, plus thousands of short films, cartoons and newsreels. Nor are they rubbish: Czechoslovak films in 1984 won awards at film festivals in Avellino, Cannes, Gijón, London, Melbourne, Montreal, Moscow and San Francisco.

But if these and other forms of popular culture fail to fit in with some people's idea of "colourful"—and the satirical semi-mime performance that I saw at the Palace of Culture was too avant-garde (and funny) ever to be called "grey"—another point remains to be made. Mr Kusin's claim about the inaccessibility of the western alternative is not true.

On the "jammed" radio, by the simple spin of the dial, I've listened to almost innumerable radio stations, including even American Forces Network and our own dear Radio 2 (rather poor reception, but due rather to the thousand-mile distance between Prague and London than to any jamming). You can hear current western pop music in many a bar, club and restaurant in Czechoslovakia any day of the week. Much of it is, admittedly, taped from West German radio. But as most of the records heard are American and British, it's clear that admiration of English-language pop is something shared by young people in socialist and capitalist European countries alike.

I was, for instance, in the town square of a small farming town to the south of Bratislava in Slovakia when the loudspeakers that had previously been announcing the forthcoming events of the week switched to music. Imagine my surprise when the music turned out to



ABOVE: Hana Zagorova—Czechoslovakia's Queen of pop music and LEFT: from another Queen, Freddy Mercury of the group of the same name. You can hear both in Czechoslovakia, but I know which I find less pretentious

be a recent single by the British group Queen (or in my case, imagine my horror, for I find Queen one of the more appallingly pretentious and elitist of groups on the scene—but that, I suppose, is a matter of personal taste).

As Roman Studicny of the Socialist Union of Youth commented to me, it would be pointless to tell young people that western pop music was no good when they plainly enjoy it—and he went as far as to admit that much of it was of a higher technical standard than a lot of the home-produced variety. He was more concerned about the political propaganda subtly inserted in programmes received from stations in

West Germany and Austria where the broadcasters were very much aware of the audience for pop in Czechoslovakia (unjammed).

Mr Kusin didn't actually say that *television* was jammed—perhaps to give the impression that there aren't any televisions to be jammed. That isn't the case—there are over four million licensed TV sets, which in a population of 15.5 million works out at an average of slightly over one per household. These sets are capable of receiving not only Czechoslovakia's two channels, but, in Bohemia and Moravia, broadcasts from West Germany and Austria. In different parts of the country, broadcasts from the German Democratic Republic, Poland, the USSR and Hungary can also be picked up—but this doesn't seem so important to critics of "lack of freedom" in Czechoslovakia.

I've watched West German television in Prague (just so I could say I've done it—the adverts make viewing pretty intolerable, and anyway my German is very limited) and many people do so. There is no jamming. And Czechoslovak television is itself quite capable of not only producing its own television programmes but importing the best of those produced by other countries—including Britain. In 1984, for instance, when the BBC "classic serial" *The Mayor of Casterbridge* was receiving its second showing in Britain, it was also being broadcast in Czechoslovakia.

Mr Kusin may well be quite right (for once) when he suggests that western newspapers are not available to Czechoslovaks—and if he means the likes of *The Sun*, I can't help feeling that they're none the worse for it. And when did you last see a copy of *Rude Pravo* in WH Smith? (Or any of the thousand-plus newspapers and magazines published in Czechoslovakia, for that matter?).

But when he includes books in the question, he's farther from the mark. A popular bookshop in Prague specialises in new foreign books—

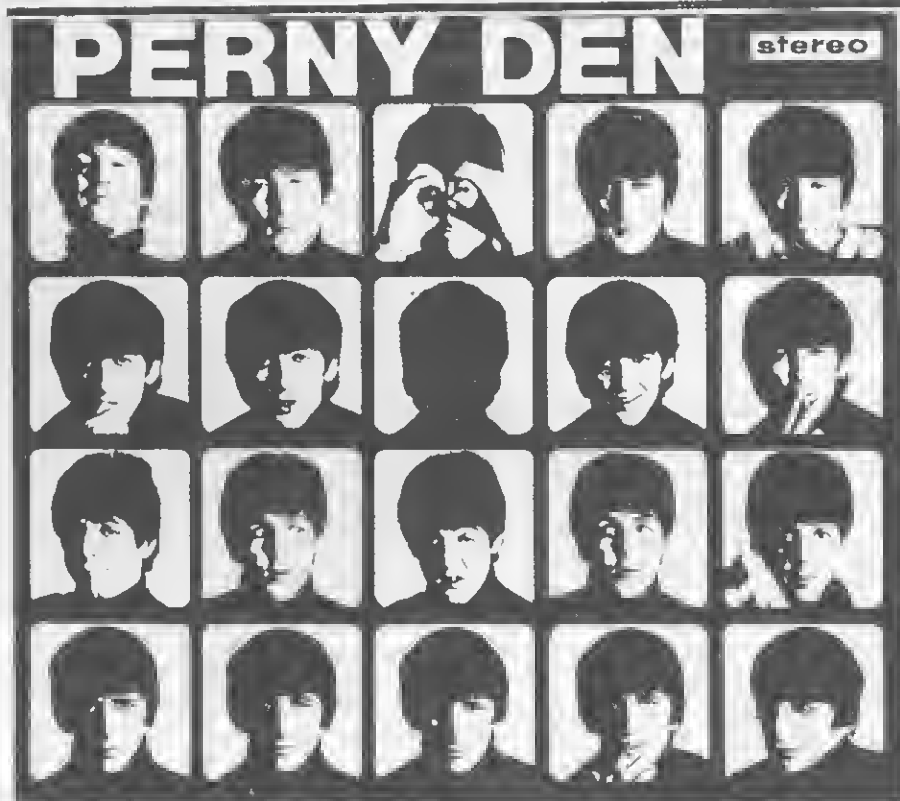


LEFT: Not available in Czechoslovakia—Rupert Murdoch's anti-union paper *The Sun* RIGHT: Not available in Britain—the Czechoslovak Communist Party's million-selling daily paper, *Rude Pravo*. Are the Czechoslovaks really the losers in this situation?

including many from the west. I've also seen second-hand books published in the west on sale in the country. Czechoslovakia itself produces six books per inhabitant every year, rating it tenth in the world according to UN statistics, and in the five years up to 1984, 900 Czechoslovak novels were translated for sale in foreign countries, including 167 in capitalist countries.

I'm certainly not going in for judging literary freedom by imports on the basis of such a record. But every year in Czechoslovakia, an average of about 650 foreign books and 150 foreign plays are produced in translation. Nor is Czechoslovakia a cultural grey dust desert when it comes to cinema. Not only do its films receive deserved recognition abroad, but Czechoslovakia welcomes films from other nations. In dry figures, that means about 200 foreign films imported annually to be shown in more than 3,000 cinemas.

What that last figure means in real terms is that even the smallest of



Still very popular in Czechoslovakia, the Fab Four. Top to bottom: Jan, Jiri, Pavel and Ricard. "Perný Den" translates as "A Hard Day", the full title being understandably untranslatable

towns has its own cinema. I've been surprised to travel by car throughout the countryside and see cinemas everywhere, often in what looked to me to be quite small villages. The town of Dobris (population 6,400) which I visited has its own cinema and a thriving cinema club, with a membership of over 400.

To add the colour to the bland statement that Czechoslovakia imports 200 films per year, that means that I have seen cinemas in Czechoslovakia running English-speaking films that included not just such political films as "Missing" (an excellent film in its own right anyway) but also "ET" (hardly Marxist-Leninist in its ideological stance), "Stir Crazy", "Tootsie"—and even such downmarket British offerings as the fantasy "Excalibur".

At any one time, about a third of Prague's ninety-odd cinemas (itself a not unimpressive figure for a city of 1,200,000 inhabitants) will be showing foreign films—and about half of those are from capitalist countries. It'll hardly impress fans of the current rock scene when I say that one film I took great nostalgic pleasure in visiting in Prague was The Beatles' "Hard Day's Night" but you shouldn't think that's the latest of western pop culture available to Czechoslovakia's youth (it was billed as a "re-released classic"). But, for instance, Roman Studnicny told me that some years previously there had been much curiosity about the Hollywood success "Saturday Night Fever". So eventually it was shown in Czechoslovakia, together with



Saturday Night Fun—if not Fever—in a Prague disco

"Grease" for good measure. "The fever soon passed," commented Roman.

Another form of the "greyness" of which Czechoslovakia is often accused is of a more literal variety in the form of smoke and soot:

"Czechoslovakia . . . its pollution an increasingly serious hazard."
(Editorial, *The Times*, 30 May, 1984)

The "increasingly serious hazard" referred to here would appear to have become a decreasingly serious hazard according to *The Times'* own report of nine months later, according to which numerous measures to combat pollution in Czechoslovakia had been announced (*The Times*, 23 February, 1985). But there is no denying that there is a problem with pollution in Czechoslovakia. It would be strange if there wasn't, particularly when you consider that since the war Slovakia in particular has built up an industrialised economy from one previously largely agricultural.

At the same time, it is a problem that is treated with great seriousness by both Government and people, and it is certainly one that comments like the one in *The Times* quoted above deliberately over-estimate while neglecting to point out that these problems are shared by capitalist countries, including our own.

If you're particularly looking for evidence of pollution, it's possible to note, for instance, that some of the impressive public buildings in Prague are slightly dingy, with a film of (dare I say it?) grey over parts of their otherwise bright and even colourful exteriors. It's only when you return to Britain that you realise that this is far from being limited to Czechoslovakia. You don't notice how dirty some of the large (and small) buildings in your own home town are until you actually look.

But as well as a similarity, there's also a distinct difference involved. While Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament in London may have recently been under wraps for a long-awaited and much-needed clean up, such renovation goes on all the time in the CSSR. It's never possible to see all the important architecture of Prague at one visit. Cleaning and restoration takes place on such a permanent basis that to experience all of the "Golden City's" sights, it's necessary to make at least two well-separated visits; on the second one you can see properly the buildings that were being renovated on your first visit—and by that time many of the buildings you saw on your previous visit will be covered in scaffolding as it's their turn for a cleaning job.

Such work, at least closer to the ground, can be not unattractive in itself. What in several streets I took to be traditional rustic covered arcades along the pavements turned out to be wooden scaffolding where restoration work was going on—visually a great improvement (if a little dated technically) on our own ugly and rusting metal structures.

The best way, though, to reduce pollution of the city environment is

at source. In many parts of Czechoslovakia's cities and towns through traffic is banned, with motor vehicles being permitted for access only. This applies not only in such places as Prague's Wenceslas Square, but also to new housing estates. Also as a protection of urban environment from the dreaded internal combustion engine, ring roads around cities are built and in some areas earth banks are built up along the sides of busy roads.

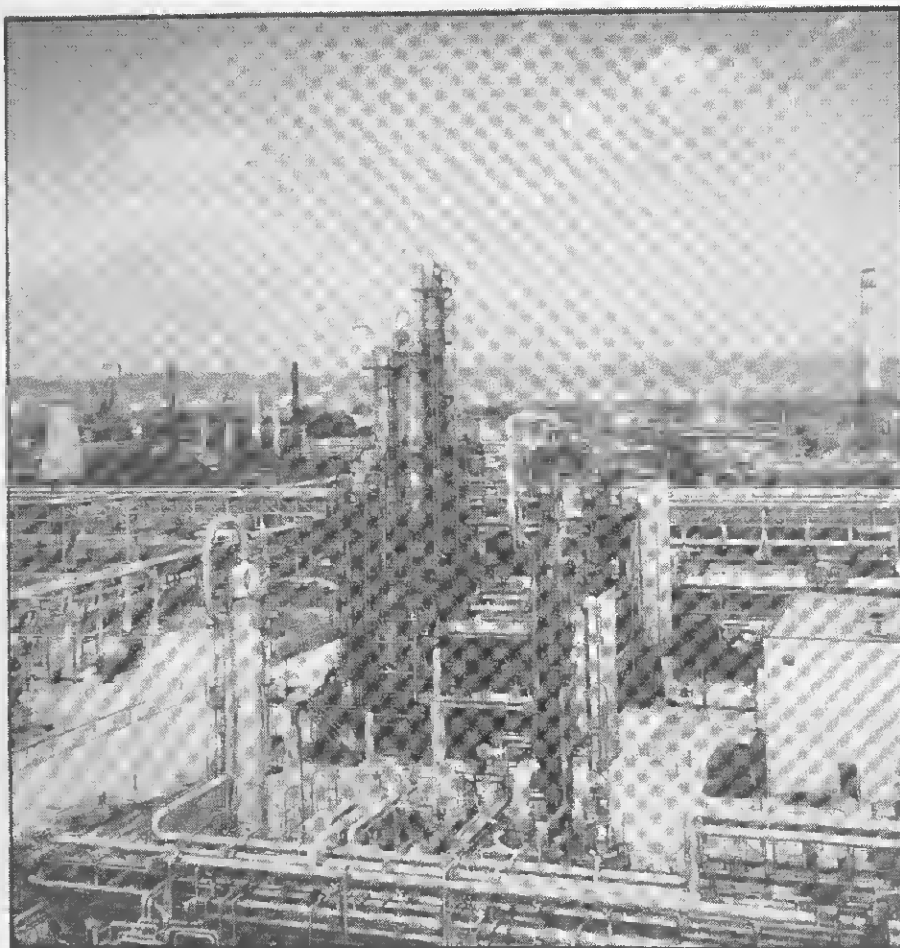
In an attack on the negative features of those very engines, experiments have been taking place in Prague with different types of buses (Karosa B713 and Skoda 1203) powered by propane-butane engines, which have a drastically reduced output of carbon monoxide. At the same time, a factory at Kaucuk Kralupy is involved in the production of additives which reduce the lead content in petrol, nowadays recognised as one of the major environmental hazards of our cities.

Pollution of the air in general is continually being reduced. In the coal and steel centre of Ostrava in North Moravia, for instance, air pollution has been reduced to about a quarter of the level of twenty years ago. Nevertheless, "we are still not content with the situation," according to deputy mayor Vlastimil Bijota, "and a major item in the next five year plan period will concern the protection of the environment, involving in particular reduction of air and water pollution in the area."

In Czechoslovakia, and perhaps particularly so in Slovakia, it is still possible to see smoking chimneys, particularly as a result of the brown coal that forms so large a part of the country's limited underground natural resources. Nevertheless, at the Slovnaft oil refinery and petrochemicals plant outside Bratislava in West Slovakia, I was surprised not to see a single chimney smoking—and that's one hell of a lot of chimneys; the plant covers eight square kilometres, big enough to require its own internal bus service.

When I asked Ivo Bedrna of the company's foreign relations department about this, he did not share my surprise. If there was anything visible coming out of the chimneys, he told me, that would be a sign that something had gone wrong with the processes and immediate investigations would take place to rectify the situation. Nevertheless, air pollution was still considered a problem, and a new process was being introduced for a further reduction of sulphur emissions into the atmosphere.

As far as water pollution is concerned, at the same plant a new mechanical-chemical-biological cleaning system—at a cost of 1,000m crowns—went into operation in 1984. Prior to its installation, Slovnaft had initially been exempted from any action over water pollution because of the planned installation; however, eventually, serious financial penalties were imposed, which came out of the company's generous funds, until operation finally began. "Now," Ivo Bedrna



The Slovnaft petrochemical works in Bratislava, as seen by the camera (and by me)...

proudly told me, "the water going out of this plant is cleaner than much of the water coming in from the Danube."

The next task, he told me, was to create a hydraulic protection system (which I admit was an idea I couldn't altogether grasp) in order to prevent any pollution of drinking water. The plant (which in the 1950s replaced another smaller one that had been in the centre of Bratislava itself and highly undesirable environmentally) is situated in what is effectively an island between two branches of the Danube, and sits on one of the biggest underground natural reservoirs in Europe. By 1986 it was hoped to make any pollution of this water impossible.

If *The Observer* of 7 July, 1984, is anything to go by, far greater attention needs to be paid to our own water supplies. An article by



...and as it might have been seen by the writer of *The Times* editorial of 30/5/84

Geoffrey Lean suggested that Britain's drinking water was unlikely to be able to measure up to new EEC standards about to come into force. According to the article, 7.5 million people were at risk from lead in water because of supplies piped through lead; 2 million were affected by water containing aluminium; and 1.5 million by water containing nitrates from artificial fertilisers. I'm not suggesting that such problems don't exist in socialist countries such as Czechoslovakia; I am suggesting that when they arise they are dealt with as priorities and no expense spared.

Another environmental feature I couldn't help noticing at Slovnaft was that between all the buildings, chimneys and mazes of pipes that you would expect at such an establishment, every available piece of

land was taken up with grass, flowerbeds, bushes and trees—a surprising mixture of industry and greenery. I was told of the ingenious way that tending of much of this greenery was dealt with. Because of the obvious risk of sparks and combustion from more modern methods of grass cutting, a piece of “old technology” was used each spring to keep the vegetation down: sheep. The plant has mutually-beneficial arrangements with numbers of other enterprises, one of which is a co-operative farm that lends its four-legged workers to Slovnaft on a once-yearly basis.

Nor is it just at Slovnaft that greenery and clean water receive attention. Hundreds of millions of crowns are spent every year on municipal and other water treatment plants. In the 1970s a number of cellulose plants in Czechoslovakia paid the ultimate penalty for the pollution of rivers—they were closed down altogether.

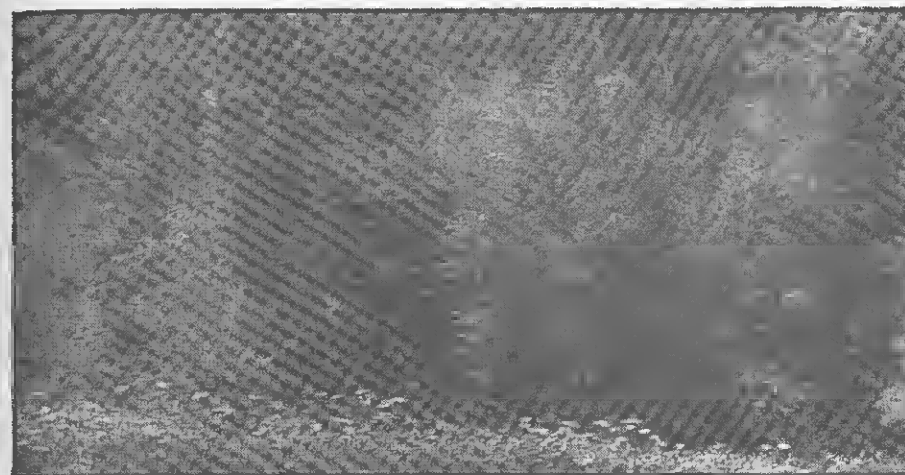
And while our green belts in Britain are being eaten away (and Channel 4's *Diverse Reports* in 1985 mistakenly produced a report which tried to prove that this was a good thing), more green is appearing in Czechoslovakia. In Ostrava, for instance, at the end of the Second World War there were only four square metres of green for every inhabitant. This ratio has now been multiplied eight times over, and is still increasing.

In the huge No.4 district of Prague, I was told by council leader Zdenek Dedic of a tree-planting campaign which in October 1984 had already resulted in the planting by volunteer workers of 32,000 trees out of a total of 100,000 targeted for completion by May, 1985. He also told me of an offer to the district from the Mayor of Prague of eight million crowns for various other environment measures. The only problem with this was finding the workers to make use of it—the problem of the labour shortage, which is one we don't have in Britain, and of which you'll hear more in later chapters.

“In Eastern Europe, the forests of Czechoslovakia . . . are dying.”
(“Acid rain—a bad trip”—Socialist Action, 31 August, 1984).

If you'd travelled in the Low Tatras of Central Slovakia, and many other areas of the republic, you might have serious doubts about this statement. And it's certainly typical of the Trotskyist weekly in which it appeared that it attempts to paint Czechoslovakia in such forcefully negative terms.

But there is indeed a problem in Czechoslovakia with acid rain. It's a problem that it's no longer so fashionable to refer to in our media. Once upon a time it used to be claimed that the European socialist countries—and Czechoslovakia and the USSR in particular—were the source of the acid rain that was severely damaging the forests of western and northern Europe. Since it's been discovered that West Germany and Britain are in fact the main culprits, and that both Czechoslovakia and



A not-yet-quite-dead forest in Czechoslovakia

the USSR are net importers of acid rain from the west, such “exposures” have had less currency.

And on 8 October, 1984, while I was in Czechoslovakia, numerous environmentalist groups in Britain joined together to urge the Forestry Commission to investigate severe damage to trees in Scotland and the north of England by new forms of acid rain—and they weren't coming from Czechoslovakia.

While *The Times* and *Socialist Action* appear to have still been unaware of it in 1984, the *Financial Times* had reported as early as 2 March, 1983, that Czechoslovakia was joining together with Poland and the German Democratic Republic in united efforts to reduce the amount of acid rain in their countries, efforts which have not been without success.

But there does indeed exist a problem in Czechoslovakia, and the problem is based in the limited mineral resources of that country. As a result of these, most power stations are—and are likely to continue to be—fuelled by locally produced brown coal, which is high in ash and sulphur dioxide content. Numerous methods are being employed and investigated to lessen the negative effects of this. For instance, no more brown-coal-fuelled power stations are to be built in Czechoslovakia. At those that there are, pollutant separators are being improved and replaced. At the Tusimice power station, for instance, an experimental desulphurisation process at a 200 megawatt unit has been removing all ash and over 90 per cent of sulphur dioxide emissions (a major source of acid rain). Removal of sulphur in other areas is going ahead, as at the Uzin fuels complex, where a unit installed for trial in 1984 is expected to reduce emissions by 3,500 tonnes per year. Many other such practices and experiments are in progress.

About half the estimated potential of 9,000 kWh per year in Czechoslovakia's rivers is extracted by hydroelectric power stations, and many small hydroelectric stations are being built. In 1983 alone, nearly 300 teams of volunteers from the Socialist Union of Youth were involved in the restoration and repair of such small stations all over the country.

There is also a small but growing movement towards the use of wind-powered and solar energy. For instance, in 1984 the firm MEZ Mohelnice began production of small windmill-powered generators for owners of weekend and holiday cottages in Czechoslovakia's countryside; the 200-watt units can charge an accumulator in winds as low as 4mph and less. More powerful units are also in production.

In the same year, the Elektrovit Works in Nove Zamky produced about 10,000 square metres of solar collectors, mostly destined for use in agriculture and food production. In 1985 it was planned to increase the total area of solar collectors in this area from 1,000 square metres to 40,000 square metres, with a saving of nearly 4,500 tonnes of fuel per year. The main uses are in water heating and fodder drying.

The fastest-growing method of energy production in Czechoslovakia, however, is the nuclear power industry, which many people in Britain would doubtless consider to be in itself a serious threat to the environment. However, the four Soviet-designed atomic power stations that have been built or are under construction are of the relatively safe light-water variety—without the risk of the Three Mile Island pressurised water reactor disaster in the United States. Nor will they be of the same design of the Soviet reactor at Chernobyl, from which the safety lessons are already being learnt. Nor, again, will Czechoslovakia be seeing any of the numerous problems of Sellafield (Windscale) nuclear reprocessing plant in Britain; all reprocessing of spent fuel rods from Czechoslovakia's nuclear power stations is to be carried out in the USSR. Even total opponents of nuclear power could feel safer—and surer of their environment—in Czechoslovakia than in the USA or Britain. And with our massive resources of black coal and North Sea gas, our own government's emphasis on nuclear power is less understandable (except that it is a handy weapon against the National Union of Mineworkers).

But if brown coal is expected to remain the main source of energy in Czechoslovakia for some years to come, what is to be done about the despoiling the environment by the process of open-cast mining by which the vast majority of it is obtained? I've seen open-cast mining just outside the West Bohemian town of Most. You can't help but be impressed by the metal giants that scoop the coal up from just below the surface, in a method far safer and less arduous than much deep mining. But at the same time, a massive acreage is being gouged out of the countryside. Isn't that a serious worsening of the environment?

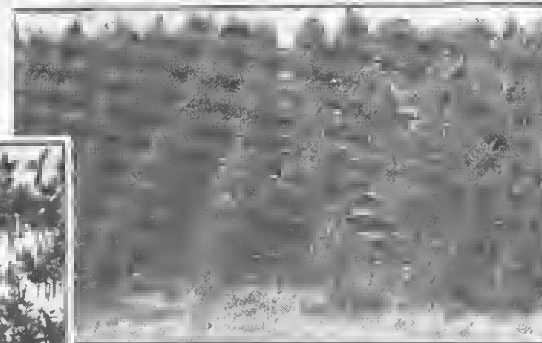
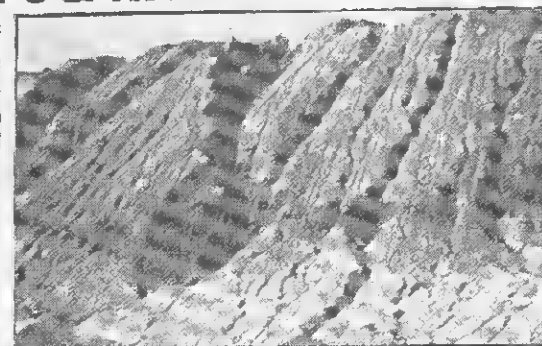
In the short term, yes. But just over the other side of the road that I

had left, I saw another area previously used for open-cast mining but where the coal deposits had long been exhausted. In their place there stood a forest (actually, it was described to me as a "wood"; as a city-dweller, I might have been overestimating it, but in Czechoslovakia they have a habit of calling lakes "ponds", so maybe the same thing applies to woodland). In north-west Bohemia, a similarly worked-out coal mine has been covered with a four-mile long banked-up area, to a height in places of 600 feet, with the river Bilina diverted to the area and a road and railway being built.

While such restoration of areas despoiled for useful purposes goes on, there are also areas where such despoliation would never be permitted.

Before & After

RIGHT: Believe it or not, both of these two photographs are of the same place—a worked out open-cast mine at Most in Bohemia before and after being re-planted



Another scene from Most



WHERE HAVE ALL
THE COAL HEAPS GONE?
LONG TIME RE-PLANTED...

and there are people prepared to make sure that it does not occur. In Czechoslovakia there are four national parks, 26 protected areas, more than 600 nature reserves and hundreds of other protected natural objects; there are also 300 protected species of animals and over 200 protected plants.

A Union of Nature Protectors was set up in Bohemia and Moravia in 1979, and now has well over 20,000 members, plus 200 affiliated bodies, with over 700 local organisations throughout the Czech Socialist Republic. Its members are involved in voluntary work on nature conservation and publicise both the pleasures of an unspoiled countryside and the need to keep it that way. All of this is very much out of keeping with the common western view of socialist countries as lands of "dark satanic mills" and little else.

But back from the brown coal and the green woods and hills to one last example of the "grey" of the misconception:

"The grev . . . Husak regime"

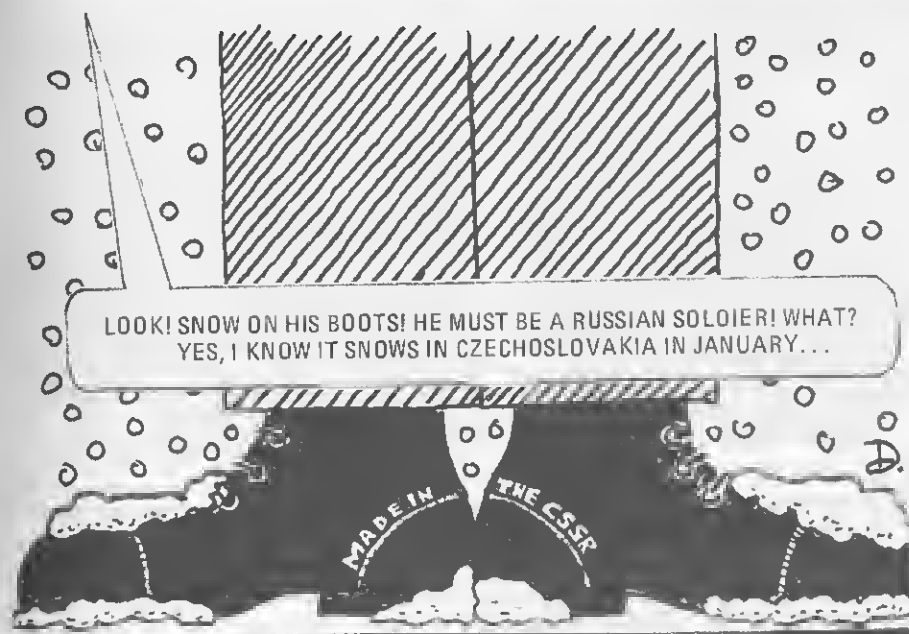
(Vladimir Kusin, "From Dubcek to Charter 77", flyleaf)

If Mr Kusin is using the word metaphorically, I'm not sure what he means by it but I've a strong feeling I'd disagree with it if I did. But if it's meant literally, perhaps it's a reference to the colour of the hair of some members of Dr Husak's government. But if we take the word "regime" in a wider sense, to mean all the elected representatives (yes, they do have them!) at all levels of government in Czechoslovakia, then it's woefully wrong. After all, over two-fifths of deputies are under the age of thirty-five, and as such unlikely to be going grey for some years yet!



**NO THANKS, MR REAGAN,
I SHAN'T BE NEEDING
YOUR GRECIAN 2000 JUST YET!**

NOT SO GREY: Zavada council leader Marian Petrus, 31, elected a councillor at 22 and secretary of the council at 27



Chapter 2: A strange occupation

When writer Jeremy Brock (*The Guardian*, 22 December, 1984) visited Czechoslovakia, he was surprised at the ease with which he passed through Customs. No strip searches, no rifling through luggage for subversive literature—just polite (and unarmed) security guards. Perhaps he was expecting to be greeted by half the Red Army and the KGB—not to mention the Czechoslovak armed forces and police. Yet I could have told him that neither I nor anyone I've discussed it with has ever had any experience different to his own. (It's slightly different on the way out: you receive a quick scan with a hand-held metal detector to make sure you're not carrying anything likely to blow up your aircraft—a reasonable enough precaution.)

It's not always so easy to get into Britain: while I was in Czechoslovakia in October 1984, three young women from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) were expected in Britain for an international gymnastics competition. They never arrived: the Foreign Office apparently considered them "undesirable"



A Czechoslovak border crossing...



...and Heathrow Airport

and refused them visas. Even when you're still within what is supposedly the same country you can have trouble with British Customs; I know people who've been searched and interrogated on their return from Northern Ireland.

These may be exceptions; but I know of no similar exceptions with Czechoslovakia. I know of no-one searched on entry to the country—though of course it must happen on occasion; and British and other tourists can obtain entry visas without any problems at the Czechoslovak Embassy.

Yet Mr Brock's surprise would be echoed by many on a first visit; and they might also be surprised at the discrepancy between the picture of an occupied, aggressive police state, which is what is so often dished up to us by our own media, often with the assistance of Czechoslovak "dissidents":

*"... a country that has been under foreign military occupation for fourteen years, and that will continue so for the foreseeable future."
(Leslie Caplan, New Statesman, 7 January, 1983)*

Mr Caplan's arithmetic appears to be out by over a year if he's dating his "military occupation" from the entry of Warsaw Treaty forces into Czechoslovakia in August 1968, but I'll leave that to one side. Nor do I want to go into any great detail on the events of 1968, as the aim of this account is to deal with Czechoslovakia as it is today, getting on for two decades after the events. I have, though, to make my own position clear: I believe that socialism in Czechoslovakia was indeed under threat from within and from the west in 1968, and see the intervention that took place as necessary for prevention of a counter-

revolution; a regrettable necessity, but one to which I find it impossible to welcome any real alternative.

Having said that—and I owe that much to the reader, even if I don't believe that it is either necessary or appropriate to make that case in full detail here—I have to take issue with Mr Caplan's definition of the current situation in Czechoslovakia as one of "foreign military occupation".

No one, a dozen years earlier than Mr Caplan, was speaking of Hungary as under "foreign military occupation", the same period after the events of 1956 in that country.

I don't know if he's one of those people who are foolish enough to believe it's possible to see Soviet tanks and armed Soviet troops patrolling the streets of Prague and Bratislava. Some people do genuinely have that fantasy, but that's precisely what it is—a fantasy.

Soviet troops have, indeed, been in Czechoslovakia since 1968. But their function is not the suppression of the local population; they'd have to be armed and on the streets in order to do that—but the only time you see them on the streets is as tourists.

I honestly don't know how many Soviet troops there are in Czechoslovakia. I've seen numerous figures suggested, up to and including 60,000—which happens to be the approximate number of US servicemen and women in Britain (though Britain is, of course, a larger country). Few people would suggest that the function of the US forces in Britain is the military occupation of the country and the suppression of the population. US forces have played and continue to play that role in a number of countries; and it's not possible to rule out such a role here in the future. But at present their role is the servicing of America's off-shore European aircraft carrier and missile base—Britain! Their



"Occupation force" in CSSR...



...and GB-USA "special relationship"

presence here can hardly be justified, though, as a defence against "invasion" by our socialist "enemies" in central and eastern Europe: the borders between the two halves of Europe are a bit far off to make that an immediate threat—if there is any threat of it at all.

There is, however, a very real threat to Czechoslovakia from the west; it shares a border with a West Germany that not only contains conventional US, British and other forces but nuclear weapons at various levels ranged against the German Democratic Republic and Czechoslovakia, which until the agreements of November 1983 with the USSR had never had a single nuclear weapon stationed on their soil.

It shares a border with West Germany in which influential figures both within and outside the government refuse to recognise the post-war boundaries of Europe and talk of returning formerly "German" areas to the Reich. Czechoslovakia has a western border that the western democracies refused to safeguard against Hitler when the USSR urged them to join it in doing so.

Is it all that surprising, then, if there are Soviet forces stationed in Czechoslovakia? But if "stationed in" and "occupying" have more than a subtle difference of meaning, some people use the very absence of Soviet armed forces from the streets as "proof" of their "occupation":

"Rank and file [Soviet] soldiers are rarely seen outside their compounds, although in provincial towns their presence is inevitably seen and heard. Officers and their wives do go out more, almost always in pairs or small groups."
(Vladimir Kusin, *"From Dubcek to Charter 77"*, 1978, page 259)

So that's it! They are in occupation, but hide away from the population (or seek safety in numbers) for fear of retribution from their victims' anger. (Against such logic, you can't win; any set of circumstances can be tailored to fit the dummy of "occupation"). The problem with Mr Kusin's statement is that, even if it was true when he was last in Czechoslovakia, it certainly isn't now. I've seen enlisted men from the Soviet Army in Czechoslovakia on a couple of occasions, and officers on three—without their wives and unaccompanied by fellow officers.

The Soviet privates and NCOs that I saw were off-duty and, naturally, unarmed. They were in uniform, because Soviet troops are required to wear their uniforms even off-duty. And they were *sight-seeing*. When I've seen Soviet troops, they've been in the tourist areas of Prague, and tourists is just what they are behaving like—and just how they were treated.

A couple of times I've seen Soviet officers (probably at the level of captain or major—I'm no expert on uniforms) in the streets alone. Once I saw an officer, an older man with badges of obviously much higher



Obviously somebody forgot to tell these Czechoslovak citizens that it wasn't patriotic of them to patronise this popular shop specialising in Soviet goods

rank and a chestful of medal ribbons—shopping with his trolley in a supermarket much as I was! On none of these occasions was there any apparent hostility to these supposed "occupiers".

Nor would you in Britain come across any hostility to off-duty US servicemen. Mind you, in their case, there would be more truth in the statement that they are kept segregated from the local population, and they are hardly if ever seen in uniform and as such are indistinguishable from the rest of us until they open their mouths (and wallets). And in July 1985, orders went out to all US Embassy guards around the world to grow their hair out of their usual crew-cuts and thus make them even more indistinguishable—and less liable to "terrorist attack"—something that Soviet troops in Czechoslovakia seem to have little reason to fear.

The Soviet Bookshop in Vodickova street and the coffee bar in the House of Soviet-Czechoslovak Friendship are as well-frequented as any others—and in Czechoslovakia that can mean very well frequented—as are the many shops where Soviet publications, prints, records and tapes can also be bought, and if there's any widespread feeling of "occupation" it's in the west rather than in Czechoslovakia itself.

"There are tanks, yes tanks, to oversee the peasants."
(English commentary to *"Pravda"*, directed by Jean-Luc Godard, 1969)

This statement was considered important enough by M Godard as a sign of "occupation" to be immediately repeated on the soundtrack. It certainly isn't true now—I've only ever seen one tank in Czechoslovakia: M Godard's seen it too—but was it true even in 1969 when Godard was filming "unofficially" in the CSSR? The statement above was



Monsieur Godard's Russian tank, Pretty menacing, eh?...

accompanied by a shot of a tank in the countryside that is so briefly glimpsed as to be unidentifiable; indeed, so brief is the shot, I'm not sure that it's not a still photograph.

But there is another tank in the film. Every time the word "tank" is heard, we see shots of it from peculiar angles—invariably looking upwards. Was M Godard risking death under its tracks? The tank in question—though you'd only recognise it if you'd seen it in reality—stands on a plinth in the "Square of the Soviet Tankists". It was the first Soviet tank to enter Prague . . . during the city's liberation from the Nazis in May 1945! Some may consider M Godard's use of this to give the impression of "Soviet occupation" to be "symbolic". I consider it plain dishonest.

But if the Warsaw Treaty forces don't operate as an "occupation force" in Czechoslovakia, is such a role carried out by the Czechoslovak army and police themselves? Some would have us believe that Czechoslovakia is a thoroughly militarised society almost from the cradle to the grave:

" . . . the kindergartens were supplied with toy tanks, rifles and rockets, and the instructors were there to provide the requisite comment on the importance of socialist military preparedness."
(Vladimir Kusin, *op. cit.*, page 204)

Can this be serious? I saw lots of toys in the large and well-equipped kindergarten that I visited in Prague, and of which I'll have more to say



...until, that is, you see the whole picture

later, but no war toys of the above description. I saw children playing, but not doing military drill. I certainly didn't hear anyone lecturing the three to six-year-olds on "military preparedness".

Perhaps all this was hidden away for my benefit, or perhaps, rather than being typical as I believe, the kindergarten was the only one in Czechoslovakia that doesn't operate as some kind of Military Academy (*Infantry* Section in more sense than one). Of course, toy weapons are far from being unknown in nurseries in Britain; which doesn't make them junior drill halls or rifle ranges.

But I do have to admit that the children in the kindergarten that I visited were *in uniform*; but hardly the sort of uniform to fit in with Mr Kusin's barrackroom implication. Though of identical cut, the dungarees and blouses that the children were wearing were of florid patterns of varying colours, and each child had his or her own personal emblem (a flower, an animal or whatever) embroidered on the front. Hardly khaki drill or olive drab.

You will, however, see those colours on the streets of cities and towns in Czechoslovakia. Military service is compulsory for men, and military uniforms are a commonplace sight in the centre of Prague. The main reason for this, however, is the fact that, like their Soviet counterparts, Czechoslovak soldiers wear their uniforms even when off duty; and that all clerical, executive and other workers in the Ministry of Defence are military personnel. Imagine the centre of London if all our defence ministry employees were soldiers: you'd see khaki everywhere. But what you don't see, not only in Britain but also in Czechoslovakia,

is soldiers marching up and down the streets in squads with bayonets fixed. It just isn't like that. But is it like this—

"What it is like to live in a police state . . ."

"The fact that we live in a police state . . ."

"... in a police state . . ."

(Zdena Tomin, "Peace", ITV schools programme, March 1985)

—and why did the emigrant dissident Mrs Tomin choose to use the phrase "a police state" three times in the course of a 25-minute schools programme on Czechoslovakia scripted by herself? Is it perhaps out of a desire to build up international peace and understanding? Part of the programme, from which one of the quotations above comes, is an extremely brief play set in a pub in Prague, where two British tourists are conversing in English with some Czechs which immediately attracts the attention of two suspicious-looking men in belted macs, who eventually arrest the Czechs after hearing such statements as "we belong to the west" and "every word you speak must be chosen with care."

I've had conversations in English in several pubs in Prague, with



Children "in uniform" in a nursery school, but not a gun or tank in sight

people from Czechoslovakia and Britain, not just the tourist-oriented pubs of the city centre. I've never had anyone look askance at me, let alone large serious-looking characters staring intently at me. Are we really meant to take Mrs Tomin's implication of an all-pervasive secret police and permanent atmosphere of insecurity seriously? I'm afraid that it seems we are.

You can, of course, see police in the streets of Czechoslovakia's towns and cities, and they are armed—as are the police forces of most European countries, east or west (with the exception, for instance, of the USSR, where the police are usually only "armed" with a striped "truncheon" normally used to direct traffic). The small holsters, though, appear incapable of holding anything more than what Americans would call a "Saturday night special". I've never seen one of them drawn, even on a Saturday night, and I'm prepared to believe what I was told—that apart from cleaning and maintenance, they rarely leave their covered holsters as often as once a year.

Perhaps I'm being gullible, like the US tourists in Britain with their famous maxim: "I think your policemen are wonderful." There are, of course, some in Britain who would disagree with that. Several people had cause to while I was in Czechoslovakia in 1984. On the day of my



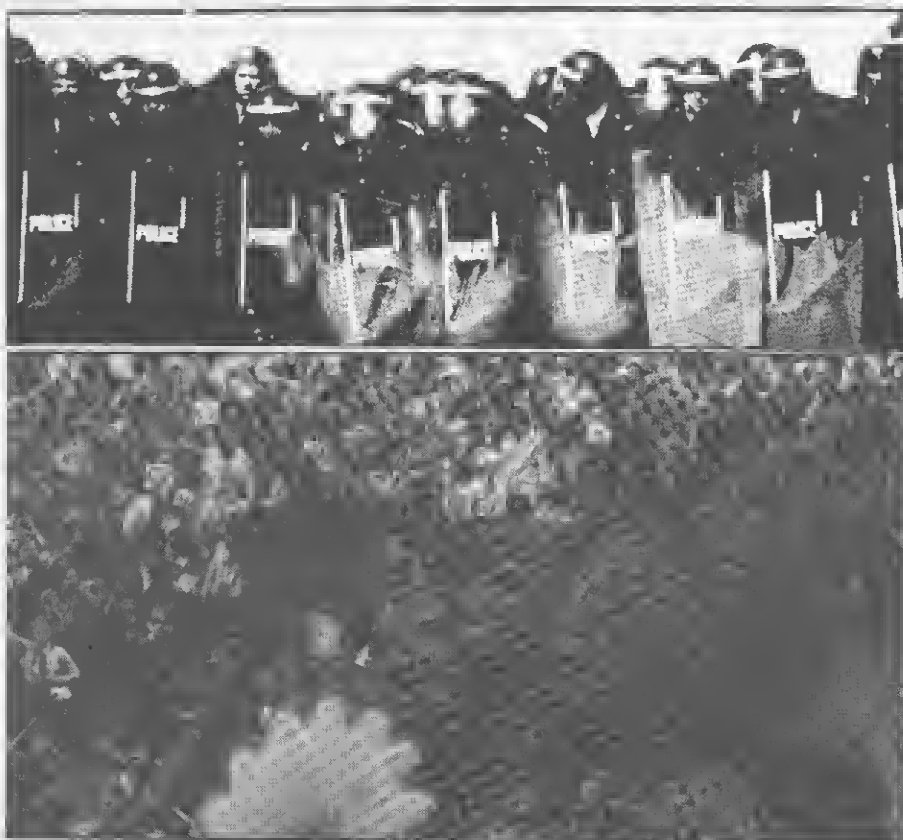
More nursery children, not only in uniform, but obviously on "military manoeuvres"

departure, the City of London police arrested 500 punks for little or no offence on their part on the day of the "Stop the City" demonstration. People were being arrested for standing in groups of three (unlawful assembly?) or for replying to the abuse given to them by the police. As one Czech who had heard of this asked me: "What would your media say if such arrests occurred in Prague? But it simply wouldn't happen here."

Less than a week before this event, police in Birkenhead arrested and

Spot the police state

The two pictures below show police at the scene of demonstrations. Which was taken in Czechoslovakia and which was taken in Britain? For the answer, turn this page upside-down



ANSWER: Don't be silly, you know perfectly well. The bottom picture shows the Czechoslovak People's Militia (unpaid, unarmed volunteers) and they're *spectating* at this May Day demo rather than policing it. In fact, they even join in such demonstrations, carrying banners and flags

jailed twelve Cammell Laird workers for the "crime" of occupying a ship in their yard in defence of their jobs. Two days later (3 October), Police Federation chairman Leslie Curtis threatened that our (unbiased and non-political!) police force might refuse to serve under a Labour Home Secretary—and next day received the backing of our biased and political Home Secretary of the day—Leon Brittan.

Less than a week farther on, three busloads of police descended on a peaceful picket of hospital workers opposing private contracting at St Ann's Hospital, Tottenham, insisting that they should disperse leaving only three pickets. An official of the National Union of Public Employees tried to argue with them and was arrested. When other pickets asked what he was charged with, they were told: "We'll think of something."

All these events occurred within less than a fortnight; and they occurred at a time during the miners' strike when the borders between Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire sported police roadblocks on every road, and anyone who couldn't provide proof positive of non-membership and non-support of the NUM could find themselves arrested or at least turned back for trying to exercise their right to travel on the Queen's highway.

It's true that Czechoslovak police are entitled to stop any vehicle on sight to check its roadworthiness, and that it is carrying a first aid kit, tool kit, warning sign and other things required by law. Woe betide you if you've been drinking: the least trace of alcohol in the blood leads to an automatic ban. I've seen a car stopped in this way—not by a road block but simply flagged down—and the car in which I was travelling pulled up behind so that we could ask directions of the police. As our destination was back in the direction we'd just come from, I expected the police to be suspicious that we were simply trying to avoid a check; but no, having pointed us the right way, they even briefly held up the traffic for the sake of our three-point turn and waved us on.

None of the foregoing is written with the intention of suggesting that while all British coppers are what a famous derogatory slogan says they are, Czechoslovak police officers are angels. Nor do I cite the examples of police action in Britain in order to justify similar activities in Czechoslovakia—though I'm yet to see any convincing evidence of such an equivalent.

The point I'm making is that we should think twice before we accept blanket condemnations of the state of affairs in socialist countries as far as the old "police state" cliché goes.

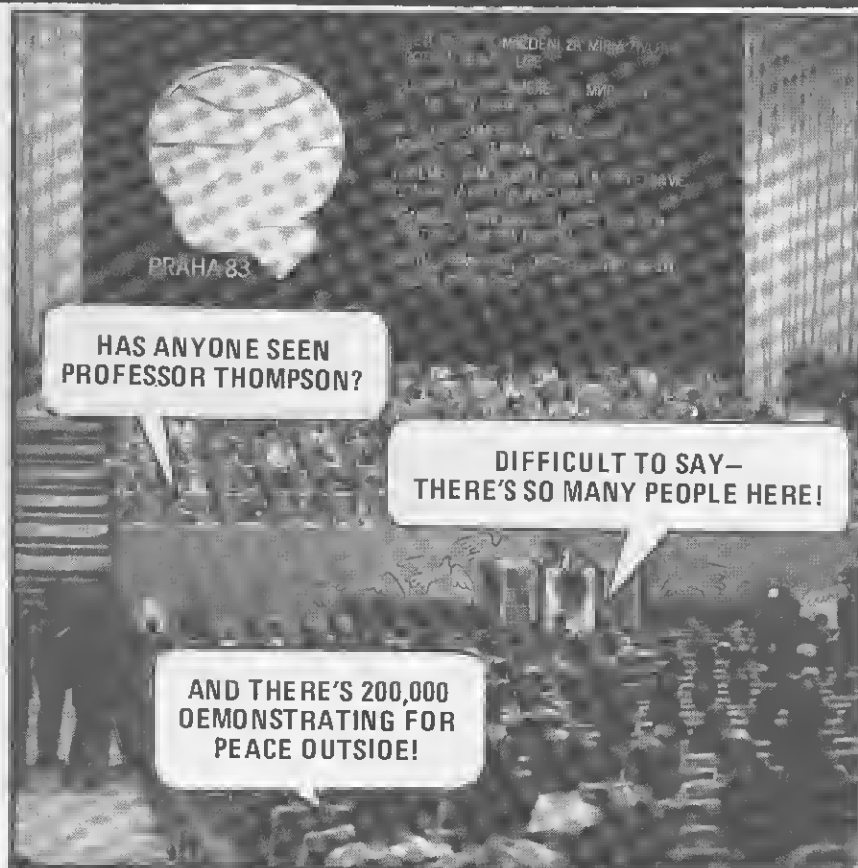
Some are so obsessed with the idea of the all-pervading nature of the state that they see the Czechoslovak peace movement as just another appendage of it and accordingly reject it out of hand:

"I must make plain my view that our movement should break off any relations with Czech officialdom—including the 'Peace Com-

mittee'—and should certainly boycott their much-advertised 'Peace Assembly' in Prague next June."

(E P Thompson, "Letter to Prague", *New Statesman*, 18 February, 1983)

The peace assembly referred to by Prof. Thompson, which he considered so unrepresentative of a genuine peace movement, was the Assembly of Peoples for Peace and Life, Against Nuclear War. It was attended by over 4,000 delegates and visitors from all over the world, east and west, north and south. The final breakdown showed that only one in five of the delegates were from socialist countries; twice as many from the developing countries and a similar number from capitalist countries. None of the slogans put forward by the Assembly were at variance with the policies of Britain's Campaign for Nuclear



The 1983 World Peace Assembly in Prague



Some of these young peace demonstrators are in uniform—that of Czechoslovakia's youth movement. But the uniform that most are wearing is the international uniform of young people—blue denim

Disarmament, of which Prof Thompson is an executive member. His opposition seems to be based largely if not solely on the fact that the Assembly was held in Prague and hosted by the Czechoslovak Peace Committee.

The people of Prague did not share his opposition. Two hundred thousand of them joined the Assembly's participants on the streets in a massive peace demonstration—without a police cordon in sight. Yet some people choose to ignore this massive and genuine movement for peace and prefer to concentrate on the activities of what even the BBC's Central European correspondent Mark Brayne described as the "tiny Charter 77 movement", which is regarded with "little more than curiosity by most ordinary Czechs and Slovaks".

Efforts are made by some to build up this "dissident" group (membership, according to the *US Colliers Encyclopedia*: 500; according to Mrs Tomin, who's unlikely to understate it: 240) into some sort of "real" peace movement in opposition to the "official" movement with its hundreds of thousands of active participants. They rarely succeed. When CND observer Jon Bloomfield arranged an informal meeting in Prague with Charter 77 supporters (with BBC TV cameras also "informally" present), they disappointed his efforts by expressing their support for Margaret Thatcher's Falklands campaign and failed to give any satisfactory answer to questions on peace.

I could have warned Mr Bloomfield. Despite the *Daily Express's* claim that "the Charter 77 movement was formed in 1977 [actually in

1976] to monitor the Helsinki human rights agreements" (the Helsinki Conference of 1975 was actually on peace and co-operation in Europe), Charter 77 has never been involved in the movement to reduce the threat of nuclear war in Europe. I heard Mrs Tomin herself, rather apologetically, admit as much more than a year before the Prague Assembly at a meeting in Bristol with the aim of setting up a West Region of Prof Thompson's "European Nuclear Disarmament". (It failed in that object; but why should a "peace" group invite as main speaker someone who admits to having had nothing to do with the peace movement in any case?)

While one or two individuals in Charter 77 (who, like Mrs Tomin, have mainly left their country for the West, many of them stepping into lucrative academic jobs) now profess an interest in peace, the majority are, in the words of *The Times*' editorial (30 May, 1984), "far more sceptical of the nuclear disarmers of the West, seeing them as dupes of the Soviet Union whose policies would weaken the West and thereby strengthen Soviet control over Eastern Europe", in other words they share the Thatcher outlook. We get a similar line from Charter 77 member Mrs Tomin:

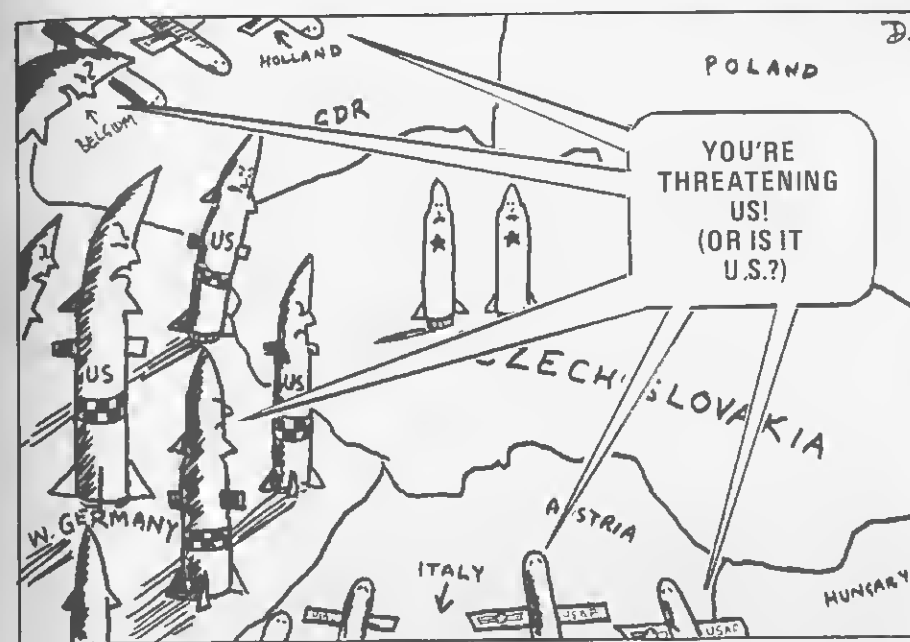
"Mary: Once a single nuclear weapon is fired neither communism nor democracy will survive.

"Karel: Excuse me—I'm talking politics you're talking emotions!"
(Zdena Tomin, "Peace", ITV schools programme, March, 1985)

Thus the "naive" disarmer "Mary" is posed against the "real world" of the "dissident", "Karel". The fact that "Mary's" statement is absolutely true, and that the "human rights" championed by "Karel" don't appear to include the right to life as Priority No. 1 shouldn't interfere with your understanding of Mrs Tomin's little skit. "Karel" admittedly goes on to say that "no sane person would wish for a nuclear war." He follows this immediately, however, with the word "But..."

Such an approach is an insult to the movement for peace, east or west, Czechoslovakia or Britain. So is Mrs Tomin's statement in the same programme that "Czechoslovakia is still occupied. Soviet missiles are now being deployed in our country..."

So they were, following the agreement of November 1983 with the USSR. But to fail to make it plain that this was in response to the stationing of cruise and Pershing-2 US nuclear missiles in West Germany makes the statement as false as if it were a direct lie. (Come to that, I've seen a videotape of Mrs Tomin at least two years before the agreement, claiming that nuclear missiles were already deployed in Czechoslovakia. A similar statement was made on 16 December, 1982, on BBC2's "Newsnight" by Tory minister Michael Mates. Had he looked at official NATO and CIA documents, he'd have known that not even they



claimed that this was the case. Prior to the stationing of cruise and Pershing-2 missiles in western Europe, not one Soviet nuclear weapon had ever been deployed in Europe outside the borders of the USSR.)

But they are now. Many people in Britain, and in the peace movement, find this difficult to understand; but as it was put to me by members of the Socialist Union of Youth, "We find it difficult to understand that people in Britain can't understand." After all, US nuclear missiles are stationed within a few miles of Czechoslovakia, as part of the US strategy for what is openly talked about as a "limited" nuclear war in Europe, and as part of a first-strike strategy.

"Of course, nobody's happy about it," Youth Union member Roman Studnicny told me, "but the majority understand the counter-measures against the US missiles." What the agreement on the Soviet missiles did was to make it clear that any attempt by the US to launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike will fail; as Czechoslovak foreign minister Bohuslav Chnoupek told the United Nations in October 1984, the counter-measure to cruise and Pershing-2 had the aim of restoring the military balance, "unfortunately on a higher and thus more dangerous level."

It would be arrogant indeed for us to criticise the stationing of nuclear weapons in a country that has had British and American nuclear weapons targeted on it for decades; nor would it, in my opinion, be right to draw the conclusion from that stationing that the Czechoslovak

people, their peace committee and their government don't genuinely want peace and disarmament.

I've not met "official" representatives of the Czechoslovak Peace Committee; but in a way it could be said that millions of people are its "unofficial" representatives. In Czechoslovakia, everyone is very much aware of the serious danger of nuclear war, and there is a widespread and genuine desire for disarmament. There are any number of people whose words on the issue I could present; I don't think I could make a better choice, though than Vera Neradova.

I met Vera Neradova at what remains of the village of Lidice in Central Bohemia. In 1942 the village was razed to the ground by the Nazis in retaliation for the assassination of Heydrich. Its male inhabitants were shot; the women and smallest children were sent to concentration camps where many of them perished. Vera Neradova lost her father, mother and two brothers; she herself was sent to Ravensbruck women's camp at the age of sixteen. The Nazis had hoped to wipe Lidice from the face of the earth. Not only is it now a monument, but a new village has been built in which Vera Neradova lives with her daughter and son and grandchildren.

"Surely everyone in the world is thinking of the danger of war," she told me. "Everyone wants to live in peace. It's the main question facing the world, and when women in Lidice come together—not just in formal meetings, but in their homes—it's the question they all have in their minds. We want to live in peace, we want our children to live in peace. All around the world people are coming together to find a solution so that commonsense can prevail. What happened here must never happen again."

That is no "official" statement, no government hand-out, no learned-by-rote response. That is the genuine view of women who lived through something that could give some foretaste of the Third World War in which every village would be a Lidice—though no new villages would rise on their ashes.

Yet such views are commonplace in Czechoslovakia among young as well as old—and commonplace certainly doesn't mean complacent. They are also the views of the government, many of whose members lived through and fought against the Nazi occupation, and know what war means better than most in the world. Could such people participate in and be "duped" by a "peace movement" that was no such thing? Could the people who fought the Nazis in their thousands in the Slovak National Uprising of 1944 and in the Prague uprising of 1945 submit meekly to the supposed "occupation" of their country so graphically (if fictionally) portrayed in some of the quotations in this chapter?

You must judge for yourself. But the most famous (and sole) "hero" of the "resistance" to "Soviet occupation", Jan Palach, made clear his attitude to freedom in the message he left when he burned himself to death in Wenceslas Square in 1968 (further such self-martyrdoms were

promised but never materialised). His two demands were as follows:

"1: Immediate abolition of censorship.

"2: Banning of *Zpravy* [a paper advocating Czechoslovak-Soviet friendship]."

And to those who believe a handful of "dissidents" to be the true representatives of peace and freedom in Czechoslovakia, I refer you to the words of someone from Britain who mixed in such circles and was surprised (he needn't have been) to find that

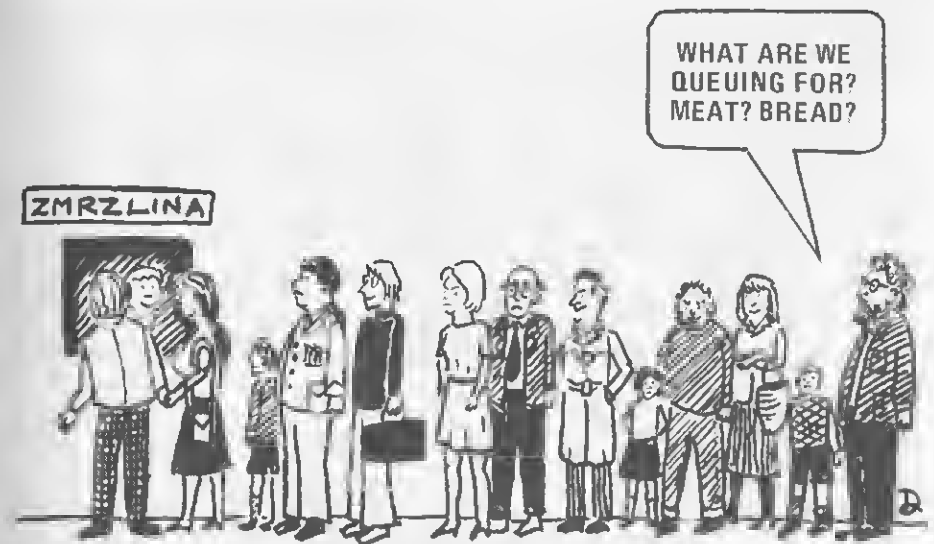
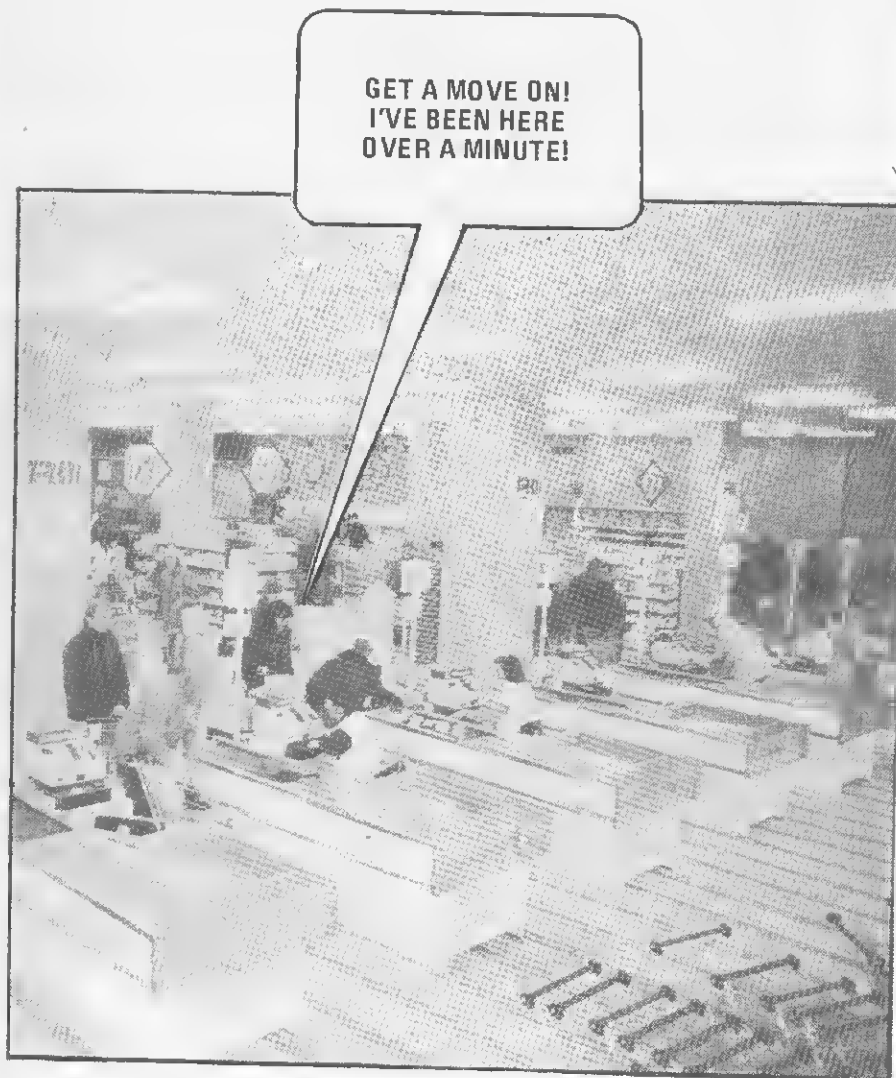
"... my friends had all through supported American involvement in Vietnam."

(Leslie Caplan, *New Statesman*, 18 February, 1983)

The "official" peace movement had, of course, been on the streets in hundreds of thousands demonstrating against it—in common with millions all round the world.



The doves may be reluctant participants in this peace demonstration, but the girls about to release them clearly aren't



In Czech: MASO = MEAT; CHLEB = BREAD; ZMRZLINA = ICE-CREAM

Chapter 3: A shortage of poverty

"When I first arrived in the West, I used to go shopping every day, for the sheer joy of not having to wait in endless humiliating queues."
(Zdena Tomin, "Peace", ITV schools programme, March 1985)

Poor Mrs Tomin! She must have led a really unhealthy existence when she was living in Czechoslovakia—living on a diet of nothing but ice cream and hot dogs. At least that's what I assume she was living on, because those are the only items that I've ever seen any long queues for in her native country.

Her television programme, when discussing the question of her quote above, dwelt long and lovingly on the full window of a butcher's shop in Britain, and she referred to the "oppressive abundance" of goods in the shops in western capitalist countries. She meant this only as a reaction against the scarcity she had become used to in Czechoslovakia; for many people the amount of goods in our shops in Britain is a really oppressive abundance in that it continually reminds them of all the

things they want and need—but cannot afford.

But back in Czechoslovakia, it's not just the meat that's in short supply—fruit and veg get in on the act as well:

"Our meal consists of lukewarm dumplings, pork, gravy and pickled peppers. The peppers turn out to be fronting for the vegetables, there being a chronic shortage, and are to become our constant companions during the week."

(Jeremy Brock, The Guardian, 22 December, 1984)

Mr Brock, during his week accompanied by pickled peppers, noticed other serious shortages in Czechoslovakia, which his Guardian article also brought to our attention, with his own clever surmises over how these shortages were overcome by the beleaguered Czechoslovaks:

"No 24-hour petrol stations. In fact no petrol stations at all. I found myself wondering where they buy the stuff. Do they haggle for it in dimly lit basements?"

Mrs Tomin's programme and Mr Brock's article present a picture of a country with both necessities and luxuries in short supply; a country where you're likely to wind up hungry whether you're a carnivore or a vegetarian, and where you'll never know where to find the petrol to travel around looking for the food so badly hit by shortages. It's an image of European socialist countries carefully fostered by our media, and assisted by painfully true stories of empty butchers' shops in Poland in the period of Solidarnosc and its rural counterpart. (In fact, with nearly all Polish farming still being in private hands, socialism could hardly have been blamed for that shortage, which was caused by farmers deliberately withholding animals from the market until their demands for higher wholesale prices were met. It's also an image that could lead someone like Derek Bromley, a miner from Coventry who was in Czechoslovakia during the 1984-5 miners' strike as a guest of the Czechoslovak miners, to say: "Most of us came here with the idea that we would see people lining up for bread. It's really opened our eyes." *(Czechoslovak Life, December, 1984)*.)

Those eyes were opened no doubt partly by the realisation that the entire image presented above is false. Not only are Mrs Tomin's queues, in my experience, a total fiction, but so is her surprise at butchers' shops actually containing meat. In Wenceslas Square, at the very centre of Prague, you can find more than one butcher's shop whose window is brimming with meat.

It seemed a little strange to me to find a butcher's shop in such a tourist centre—rather like finding a fishmonger's in Trafalgar Square. But what really surprised me (and I for one should have known better!) was the free availability of good quality fresh meat, at that particular



The sort of thing you'll have to eat if you can't find any *zmrzlina*

Anything in this shop? Not a sausage!



shop and all over Czechoslovakia. Having obviously been taken in more than a little myself by the "shortages" stories, I was even more amazed to see the price of what I took to be best quality lean beef: 46 crowns per kilo. I took this to be about the same as our prices in Britain, but on checking on my return, found that this wasn't quite the case. At the official exchange rate then applying (about 12.7 crowns to the pound, October 1984), it worked out at roughly £1.67 per pound—considerably cheaper than in Britain.

There was some limitation to the types of meat available; plenty of beef, pork and bacon; not much lamb, although I was told that this was on the increase. On the other hand, among the poultry, duck and goose were both considerably less rare—and less expensive—than in Britain.

Mr Brock's missing vegetables? I don't know—perhaps he didn't bother to check what he was ordering on the menu in Czech; perhaps he was there at the wrong time of year for a wide range of fresh vegetables—though he describes the "shortage" as "chronic" (and how he can judge that from a stay of one week I don't know). But his description of his hotel sounds like the Zlata Husa (Golden Goose) in Wenceslas Square, where I've also stayed. I've eaten in its basement restaurant ("an ill-lit dive in the bowels of the earth", he calls it; I thought it was quite smart) on several occasions with a wider range of vegetables than he suggests (i.e., no range).

But if indeed Mr Brock was staying in Wenceslas Square, both in shops in that square and in roads leading from it you can find shops and open-air stalls selling fresh vegetables (some of which I didn't even recognise) at perfectly reasonable prices and not in short supply. You will also see, it's true, a lot of tinned and preserved vegetables like Mr Brock's peppers alongside the fresh, just as you'll find much cooked and smoked meat alongside the fresh. But who could grumble at plentiful fresh tomatoes at 5.5 crowns a kilo (20p per pound at the then current exchange rate) in October (!), 1984? And as Czechoslovakia's pricing policy allows for lower prices for some produce when in season, they must be even cheaper in July and August.

No such claim of cheapness can be made for the petrol that Mr Brock had such difficulty in locating. It is admittedly more expensive than in Britain (though this is hardly a universal fact in socialist countries; in the USSR, for instance, price levels are considerably lower than our own). But the implied unavailability of petrol in Czechoslovakia is simply not true; in Prague, for instance, the number of 24-hour petrol stations is not Mr Brock's none but in fact eight; the number of other petrol stations is not his similar none but in fact about forty.

This may not seem many, but Czechoslovakia doesn't have half a dozen oil companies vying with each other. And Mr Brock needn't have remained in ignorance; a list of the addresses of all petrol stations is just one of the many pieces of information in the pamphlet "The Month in



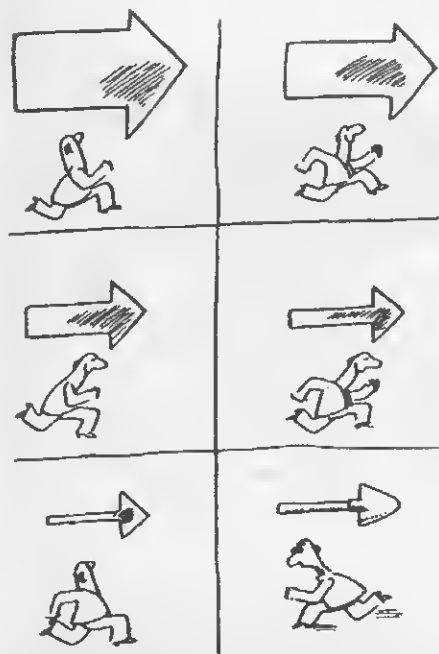
Prague", available free in English, among other languages, in every hotel in the city (except when there's a shortage, do I hear Mr Brock add?)

An actual visit to Czechoslovakia might have the same effect on such misconceptions as it did on Kent miner Mark Evans in the same group as Derek Bromley, who said: "Many of us in the group believed all the stories in the press back home about the socialist countries, about oppression and the lack of things in the shops and so on. Well, we've seen for ourselves that that's not true. We've been out shopping, we've been with the rank and file." Nevertheless, I don't want to give the impression that everything in the shops is as cheap as some of the examples I've quoted, or that everything is available in a state of near-total abundance. A conscious policy of price-fixing and planned supply is involved.

"No-one works but the plan is always fulfilled. The plan is fulfilled but there is nothing to be had. There is nothing to be had but everyone has it. Czechoslovaks recite this ditty when they wish to impart the special flavour of their economy."

(Leslie Colitt, Financial Times, 9 March, 1984)

I've read Mr Colitt's article several times, and I'm still not sure which of two points he's trying to make. Is he suggesting it's a lie that plans are fulfilled, that goods are available, and that people buy them? Or does he mean that all these statements are in fact true, but he's damned if he can see how it works out? I suspect he means the latter; the former isn't true, and readers of the Financial Times prefer realism, while knowing precisely which side their paper is on (the side of big



"No-one works" in Czechoslovakia, says the *Financial Times*. Not true, of course, but as this cartoon from the Hungarian-language magazine *Het* shows, even in Socialist Czechoslovakia, not everyone's over-keen on manual labour

business); and also I've heard the sentiments of the latter (though not the ditty itself) in Czechoslovakia.

But nobody need really be puzzled by the workings of a planned economy. Production to a national plan with the aim of fulfilling the needs of the population and building on the economy for the future may never produce an exact fit of production to distribution and needs. But it can get a lot closer to it than our "free enterprise" system where production is only "planned" on the basis of how to make the greatest profit, and where success is determined by "competition"—that is, dog eat dog, in which the big dogs get bigger still by eating the smaller ones and spitting out the bones. If that system "works", then the three million officially unemployed—and millions more on low incomes—might think it doesn't "work" for them.

Under a planned economy like Czechoslovakia's, there are still problems; as Mr Matejka with whom I had discussions in the government offices in Bratislava pointed out to me, "Planning is not carried out by the state planning commission alone, but by a complicated chain of communication that stretches right from the ministries to the individual enterprises, and every link plays a role. There are a great number of links in the chain, so problems can arise; not only can there be errors in the estimate of the market for particular

products, of the relation between buyer and seller, but there can also be misinformation.

"For instance, there was at one time a rumour that flour and sugar would be going up in price—so stocks of these were bought up in many shops. Such a situation needs swift action, and it's not always possible to get goods into the shops in time. But generally, such problems are slight." It's interesting to note that such price increases are rare enough for such a run on available stocks to occur. Who in Britain ever enters a supermarket confidently expecting the prices of flour, sugar or anything else to be the same as they were a week before? I know I don't.

But despite these problems—and estimates of demand can never be more than estimates—such questions can generally be anticipated in a planned economy. "It's no secret in our country how much a certain factory or enterprise is producing", Vaclav Janeczek of the Federal Institute of Prices in Prague told me. "Thanks to central planning, the data are available to solve problems in advance and largely replace the role played by competition under capitalism. This isn't possible in all the smallest details, and it can happen that there are short supplies of certain goods at times—that depends on the quality of our tests of the consumers' needs. But you can always be sure that prices are the same all over."

What you won't see anywhere in Czechoslovakia is crops being ploughed under, dairy cattle being slaughtered and fruit dumped in harbours (or even the Danube or Vltava) in order to maintain price levels of wheat, milk and fruit. You'll find no butter or beef mountains and no wine lakes. There may be inevitable minor dislocations in a planned economy from time to time, but these symptoms of capitalist economy are more like having an arm wrenched off than a mere dislocation.

When, as even the *Daily Telegraph* (26 October, 1984) reported, there had been a record grain harvest in Czechoslovakia of some 12,000,000 tonnes, this wasn't a signal for setting fire to the cornfields, but a welcome sign that the country was well on the way to self-sufficiency in agricultural production. The recent record grape harvest didn't lead to the creation of a metaphorical wine lake but to reduced prices for wine.

It is a commonplace to accuse socialist countries of being unable to feed their own people. Most commonly, it is pointed out that the USSR has to import grain whereas Russia under the tsars was able to export it. It's rarely added that under the tsars the peasants went hungry but now the people are well fed. But if Czechoslovakia has in the past had to import agricultural produce to keep its people fed, that is a situation that is fast disappearing. In an interview in October 1984, Slovak agriculture and food minister Jan Janovic quoted the 19th-Century Slovak scientist Daniel Lichard as having said that he who can grow two

ears of corn where one grew before does more for humanity than the most famous marshal with his troops. In Czechoslovakia, the minister pointed out, "three ears of corn are now harvested where one grew forty years ago."

In Czechoslovakia, as opposed to the United States, for instance, where large tracts of land are regularly taken out of cultivation, there are plans to bring a million hectares into productive use over the next decade by the draining of marshland and the irrigation of dry land. The 1984 record of 12,000,000 tonnes isn't likely to stand for long. A planned development of agriculture is possible because 30 per cent of agricultural land is cultivated by state farms and 65 per cent by co-operative farms. These farm on a large scale; there are, for instance, less than 1,700 co-operative farms as opposed to the millions of medium and small farms that existed before the first co-operatives were set up.

The small farmer effectively no longer exists in Czechoslovakia; but his demise has been as a result of his incorporation into prosperous collectives, rather than through the bankruptcy and pauperisation that has occurred in the United States. The socialisation of agriculture by the two methods employed in Czechoslovakia, combined with national agreements on pricing, provision of machinery, fertilisers and so on, form the basis for effective state planning; and the direction in which that planning moves is up. Alongside socialised farming, a certain amount of private production takes place, as in all socialist countries, mainly in the form of horticulture and, particularly in Moravia and



Slovakia, in viniculture. The products of the former are sold, together with those of the state and the co-operatives, at agreed and fixed prices; the products of the vines are usually consumed by the farmers and their families—and who can blame them?

Where farming is linked to industry, planning leads to similar forward steps. A new meat-packing plant, for instance, began production in Policka in East Bohemia in November. The plant that it took the place of used to turn out 6,200 tonnes of meat each year and 9,350 tonnes of meat products. The planned production for 1985 was 13,200 tonnes of each.

Industrial development under socialism isn't a simple case of continual steep upward climb, or a series of great leaps forward for that matter, no matter how rosy your spectacles. But nor is it the picture of stagnation our media so often presents. Such tales are fine for consumption by the workers in whose eyes it is necessary for the likes of *The Sun* to paint socialism as black as possible, and not so much warts and all as with as many extra warts added as possible. But big businessmen need a more realistic picture of economic matters, so occasionally big business's house paper the *Financial Times*—unlikely to praise socialism out of left-wing bias—comes up with some interesting facts on socialist economies.

On 29 January, 1985 it reported that the "recovery" of the Czech economy—from an admitted period of less than satisfactory growth—was gathering pace, having begun in 1983 and accelerated in 1984. In 1984 the *FT* had reported Czechoslovakia's improved exports (9 February) and its increased surplus of foreign currency (7 February); at the end of August the *FT*'s European (Frankfurt) edition had gone so far as to report that Czechoslovakia's economy was exceeding the targets laid down in the 5-year plan. The favourable picture painted by the *FT* in January 1985 were a 3.2 per cent increase in gross national income in 1984 as against 2.7 per cent for 1983; and increases of 3.9 per cent in industrial output, 3.6 per cent in agricultural output and 3.6 per cent in exports to the west.

The rise in exports to the west wasn't quite as good as the 4.6 per cent rise being predicted a year earlier; but it compared well with the 1.5 per cent drop in 1982 and the 0.5 per cent increase recorded in 1983. A trend is clearly being established. This, together with the foreign currency surplus of over a billion dollars has allowed Czechoslovakia to pay off loans from western banks ahead of schedule, leaving it the country with the lowest per capita indebtedness in the socialist economic grouping, COMECON. This cannot prevent the continuing tales of economic stagnation, nor the assertions that it is COMECON membership that is the cause of fictitious stagnation:

"... the economy of the country could not be regenerated as long as

it was a subservient appendix of the Soviet economy."
(A H Hermann, "A History of the Czechs", 1975, page 279)

Admittedly, Mr Hermann is here writing about the 1960s, though many would hold to the same opinion now. It is no more true now than it was then. This description treats the relationship between the USSR and Czechoslovakia as a colonial one. Yet the classic feature of colonialism is that the colonial power extracts raw materials and basic production of the colony at ridiculously low prices (if not as outright plunder) and uses them as the basis of its own industrial production, turning them into finished articles, as Britain did in its heyday as the "workshop of the world".

However, with Czechoslovakia's relative lack of raw materials, particularly in the form of mineral resources, the economic relationship between the two countries is one in which it is in the main the USSR that supplies the raw materials and Czechoslovak industries that process them and turn them into finished products. This is most notably so in Slovakia, 40 per cent of whose foreign trade is with the USSR. The Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia were industrialised countries before the Second World War; Slovakia was largely backward, with only a little light industry. Having been built up with assistance from the Czechs and from the USSR, it now has its own extensive heavy and light industries. For some people, even this is a problem—

"... the country produces too wide a range of industrial goods".
(Leslie Collett, *Financial Times*, 9 March, 1984)

—but it hardly fits in with the description of Czechoslovakia as an "appendix of the Soviet economy". Others will tell you that the situation in which Slovakia receives more than 16 million tonnes a year of crude oil from the USSR for its petrochemical industries, and tens of millions of tonnes of metals, including three-fifths of its light metals such as aluminium, makes Czechoslovakia *dependent* on the USSR. You can't win ... either it's a colony, or it's the subject of blackmail. If there was no trade whatsoever between the two countries, the USSR would probably be accused of *blockading* Czechoslovakia.

The simple fact is that it's a mutually beneficial relationship, and no one could cite a single instance of the USSR ever using its supply of raw materials as a blackmail note against Czechoslovakia. It's certainly true that the Soviet Union has notified the CSSR that no further increases in the amount of crude oil supplies can be expected in the foreseeable future; but that's hardly a "do this or else" situation, just the simple fact that oil resources—even those of the world's biggest oil producer, the USSR—are finite.

But if Czechoslovak industry and agriculture represent a success story, is this proof that it isn't the same situation as the American

"recovery" and "boom" that leave tens of millions unemployed and tens of millions more in poverty? Certainly not. As to unemployment, I'll be dealing with that question in Chapter Six. On the distribution of wealth, I'll refer you to "The New State of the World Atlas". This was co-written by Michael Kidron of the Socialist Workers Party, a Trotskyist group that condemns the socialist countries as "state capitalist", and can hardly be considered likely to be biased in favour of the CSSR.

Its Map 38 grades countries according to the total income of the top five per cent of the population as compared to the total incomes of the bottom 20 per cent. In Britain of course, the top twentieth get more between them than all the bottom fifth. Czechoslovakia is one of the countries (mainly socialist) where it's the other way around (and a lot fairer). I don't know the precise differentials between the highest paid workers in Czechoslovakia (and there are no shareholders being paid fortunes for sitting around) and the lowest paid; but I do know that the position is in any case much equalised by the subsidising of basic essentials that keeps their prices very low. Some people actually see that as a disadvantage:

"The extent of price subsidising in Czechoslovakia has long been staggering, and more recently acquired unbelievable proportions. One can look at this process as a thoroughly uneconomic way of running a national economy no matter whether one accepts the supply-demand principle or the Marxian notion that prices express roughly the value of things."
(Kusin, pages 228-9)

Subsidies on basic necessities may be a "thoroughly uneconomic way of running a national economy" but I must say I much prefer it to the "thoroughly economical" way Britain's economy is managed under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government. But Mr Kusin's reference to the "Marxian notion" of prices displays either his ignorance of Marxism—or his assumption of such ignorance on the part of his readers. Marxists believe that the value of any commodity is determined by the amount of "socially-necessary labour time" that goes into its production, with "surplus value" being created by that labour, and that *under capitalism*, the market sees to it that prices approximately equal the actual value of any goods produced and sold. But if all, or most, production is social rather than private, then while the total value of all goods may approximate to the total prices, there's no reason whatsoever why some prices should not be adjusted up and others down, also keeping reinvestment and social spending in mind in the overall plan. And that's just what happens in Czechoslovakia.

The price of food, rents, fares and charges for power are all kept low. For instance, food is on average subsidised at a rate of 23 per cent; bus,

tram and underground fares are held at a maximum of one crown: rents are subsidised and their levels—low ones—strictly applied. This all has to be paid for, and so other items cost more than someone living in Britain might expect. So if the beef I saw at 46 crowns per kilo was cheap, the calculators that I saw on sale at prices ranging from 620 crowns to 780 crowns definitely were not. Clothes, on the other hand, seemed to be priced roughly similar to those in British shops.

Pricing policy is worked out in the Federal Institute of Prices, a body similar to our own former Prices and Incomes Board with one notable difference: the Federal Institute controls prices—the Prices and Incomes Board never did. It was very good when it came to keeping down wages, and very good at *talking* about keeping prices down, but that was about it. The Federal Institute, on the other hand, is very effective, particularly on the necessities of life. Prices do rise occasionally, but other than for luxuries invariably slower than incomes. For instance, food prices between 1975 and 1981 rose by 6.5 per cent—considerably less than world prices—and other prices by 18 per cent—raising the cost of living altogether by 11 per cent. But in the same period total monetary incomes rose by 25 per cent.

Exceptional increases do occur from time to time; the blow is usually softened by other measures. In February 1982, for instance, price increases were announced for certain types of meat and meat products, and for cigarettes and other goods. But at the same time, general increases in wages, pensions and child benefits were also announced. We should be so lucky.

What might have seemed less lucky for me was an exceptional increase that took place in October 1984 when I was in Czechoslovakia: the price of beer went up by a third! That sounds like a fairly drastic step. It becomes less so when you realise that prior to the increase it was possible to buy beer as cheaply as 1.70 crowns—about 15p—for a half-litre, and that this was the first increase in the price of beer in Czechoslovakia for over fifteen years—and in those same fifteen years the cost of beer in Britain had gone up seven or eight times over.

Nevertheless, that Czech folk hero the Good Soldier Schweik, the world-famous hero of the renowned anti-war book by the Czech writer Jaroslav Hasek, had warned that any government that increased the price of beer would fall (though the government remains in office). To many people, Czechoslovakia, and particularly in Bohemia, beer must be seen as one of the basic necessities; the leader of Prague 4's council described it to me as "liquid bread". Less politely, it was suggested to me in Slovakia—where beer takes second place to wine as the national tipple—that consumption was so high (an average of 148 litres per annum for the entire population, of 210 litres for adults) that some people seemed to have forgotten about water.

It was also suggested that this high consumption had led to lowering of quality through the reduction of fermentation times. It was not



considered possible to further increase beer production at the present, so some reduction in consumption was necessary to restore quality. The reduction appears to have stabilised at about 12 per cent (after an initial drop of about 20 per cent). The announcement of the increase in the price on Friday, 12 October came as little surprise to anyone—but it was difficult to find beer anywhere well before the weekend was over and the announced increases took effect.

Even increased, beer prices in Czechoslovakia still compare more than favourably with our own—though comparisons are difficult.

because there's nothing quite like Czech beer produced in Britain. But at the same time as the announcement, increases in pensions, sickness and child benefits, and in the wages of various workers, for instance in the health service, were announced. Officially, the two announcements were unconnected. We could do with such "unconnected" increases each time our own beer goes up, whether it's thanks to the Chancellor or the breweries.

If beer consumption is lower in Britain than in Czechoslovakia, one contributory factor may be the fact that our "official" national drink is tea. In the same week that the first beer price increase for fifteen years was announced in Czechoslovakia, an increase of 12.5 per cent in the price of tea was announced in Britain. It wasn't announced by any Prices Administration, and there were no compensatory announcements of increased pensions to help the retired pay for what for many of them is their sole beverage.

Yet the same companies that continually increase the price of their tea—and nobody except their accountants gets consulted about that—often do so at a time when the world price of tea is falling. That is, the price paid to the growers, and their slave-labour-wage workers, is going down, so there is often not even the justification of passing on an increase to the consumer. In Czechoslovakia, things work differently. There is often no direct relation between wholesale prices and retail prices—but it's the other way round than in my tea example. Prices paid to farmers for their produce are often increased—while the prices to the consumer remain the same. Subsidies on basic needs amount to tens of millions of crowns every year.

You shouldn't get the impression that all these matters are decided arbitrarily by obscure planning commissions and prices boards living in ivory towers and making all decisions on the basis of lengthy abstracts and masses of dead statistics. The Federal Institute of Prices isn't a body with executive powers; it makes recommendations to the government, and these recommendations are based on consultations with consumers and with management and trade unions right down to the level of the individual factory or farm.

This isn't bureaucracy, it's democracy. When discussing democracy, opponents of socialism argue that as a system it takes away freedom of choice, in goods as well as political parties, and often paint a picture of shops with only one product (usually packaged in grey cardboard) in each range. Anyone who's been in the Kotva department store in Prague (or any other shop in Czechoslovakia for that matter) knows it simply isn't true.

Mind you, there are cases of unavailability in Britain on occasion, even if you've got the money. For instance, prior to the Portugese Revolution of April 1974, I was one of those who never bought Portugese sardines as part of the boycott of the brutal fascist dictatorship of Caetano and previously Salazar. Imagine my surprise

when, on attempting to sample the delights of democratic (and even revolutionary) sardines shortly later, I found that they couldn't be had anywhere for quite some time, where previously you'd been falling over them. I'd love to know what "state planning commission" was responsible for that particular shortage.

That's the opposite of one shortage that is indeed chronic in Czechoslovakia. No matter how many "endless humiliating queues" Mrs Tomin had stood in before 1974, she'd never have found anything in the shops from Portugal—though now she would. A British friend of mine in Prague told me that his former practice in England of always checking the country of origin of fresh or tinned food to see if it came from a fascist or racist state—as so much of it does—was not necessary in Czechoslovakia. There just isn't any. My limited experience of shopping in the CSSR confirms that. The CSSR will begin importing goods from Chile and South Africa when they and similar countries begin large-scale production of that most basic of necessities—freedom.

SERIOUS FOOD SHORTAGE IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA None of these products is available in a single shop in Czechoslovakia



...they all come from South Africa

THE CANDIDATE I'VE JUST VOTED FOR
IS A MEMBER OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY—
THEY ALL ARE, EXCEPT, THAT IS, FOR
THOSE IN THE SOCIALIST PARTY, THE
FREEDOM PARTY, etc., etc., etc...



Chapter 4: Democracy—one big party?

Let's allow Mr Michael Kidron of the Socialist Workers Party to make the most obvious and best-known statement about the form of government in the CSSR:

*Czechoslovakia—Complexion of Government: One Party
(Map 23, New State of the World Atlas, Kidron and Segal)*

That's fairly plain and straightforward, and would probably be accepted by the vast majority of people in the western world. The members of the four other parties besides the Communist Party represented in the CSSR's Federal Assembly might have a little difficulty swallowing it; so might, for instance, the Assembly's deputy chairman, Dr Bohuslav Kucera, who is also chairman of the Czechoslovak Socialist Party.

Czechoslovakia is not alone in the peculiarity of its "one-party state". Other socialist countries sharing a similar schizophrenic system include

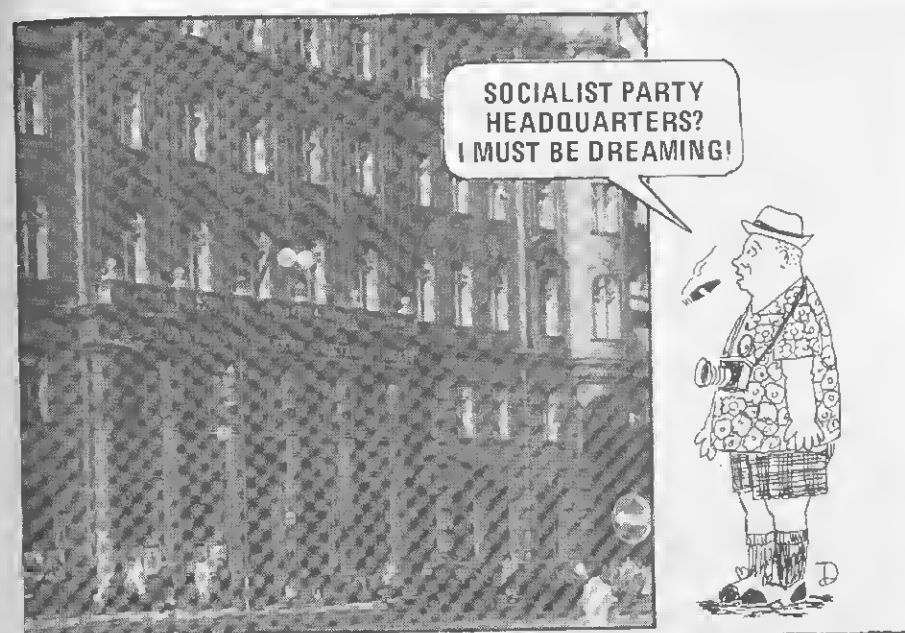
Bulgaria and the German Democratic Republic, where other parties than the Communist Party continue to take part in government despite regular (western) denials of their existence. Some anti-Czechoslovak writers take a more subtle approach to the question than Mr Kidron's straight lie. For instance:

"A few other parties—the Czechoslovak People's Party, the Czechoslovak Socialist Party, the Slovak Revival Party and the Slovak Freedom Party—are permitted to exist to support the appearance that varying viewpoints can be maintained in the country."
(*Encyclopedia Americana*)

The political parties named do indeed exist—though "Slovak Revival Party" is more usually translated as Slovak Reconstruction Party—but one is entitled to question the *Encyclopedia Americana's* blunt assertion of the reason why they are "permitted" to do so. (Indeed, the two-party system of the *Encyclopedia's* country of origin could perhaps more justifiably be accused of merely giving the "appearance" of free choice: apart from maybe a difference in style, who is able to distinguish clearly between Democrats and Republicans? If the former are generally considered to be the left of the latter, it has to be added that in the South the Democrats are probably even further right than the Republicans: whereas individual Republicans—such as former Mayor



Publications from several non-Communist parties



Lindsay of New York—are what in US terms would be considered progressive. In 1980 I wouldn't have liked to have had to choose between Carter and Reagan.)

But while the two-party system in the United States has grown up over centuries, the non-Communist parties in Czechoslovakia are in the main re-formations of existing political parties that took place in the 1940s, most notably when the parties of the right left the government in 1948 in an attempt to sabotage the country's course towards socialism—an attempt which failed when workers took to the streets in their thousands and demanded the continuation of the government programme. In the previous elections, the Communist Party had obtained 40 per cent of the votes; together with the votes of the Social Democrats (nothing like our own!) with whom the Communists had merged in Slovakia and were to do so in the Czech lands, their votes constituted an overall majority.

New parties were set up by members of three parties that deserted the government who wanted to continue the transition to socialism; the Freedom Party had already been set up during the anti-Nazi struggles of 1944. To imply, as the *Encyclopedia Americana* does, that they were all creations of the Communist Party and that their continued existence over four decades is all part of a big conspiracy to "give the appearance" of choice is stretching the imagination a little too far—as well as being an insult to the intelligence of the people of Czechoslovakia, all of whom can apparently, according to *Encyclopedia Americana*, be fooled

all of the time.

All the other parties are considerably smaller than the Communist Party, it's true; and it's also true that each of them accepts that the leading role in government and society as a whole will continue to be taken by the Communist Party; but they perform independent functions: the People's Party, for instance, represents the interests of Christians in the Czech lands—and have their own newspapers, all of them, with the exception of the Slovak Freedom Party's weekly *Sloboda*, dailies, and freely available.

Nobody would have suggested that the Liberal Party ceased to exist in the period of the Lib-Lab Pact in Britain in the 1970s, or that it became a mere appendage of the Labour Party, totally under its control. Indeed, many might suggest, not without justification, that it was a situation of the "appendage" wagging the dog—and a right-wing Labour leader like Callaghan was only too willing to be wagged, using the excuse of the need for Liberal support as grounds for making little or no change in capitalist Britain.

But if, even in such a slanted form as in the *Encyclopedia Americana*, information on the different parties in Czechoslovakia is available, how is it that the "one-party state" version is circulated and accepted as a literal truth? One has to doubt the integrity of those who circulate a convenient if false "proof" of lack of democracy, undoubtedly knowing it to be at the very least an oversimplification to the point of deception; the phrase "leading role of the Communist Party" is simply not interchangeable with "single-party government".

However, all the parties do work together in a single organisation which groups together in addition the youth movement, the women's movement, the peace movement, the trade unions, and dozens of other political, social and even sporting organisations. It has a title that sounds a little unfortunate to the British ear: the National Front. It also, embarrassingly, has the same emblem as our own nasty little bunch of fascists—the vertical strikes of the N and the F are linked together—with the difference that the Czechoslovak emblem is surmounted by a five-pointed star. The name and the emblem are all the two organisations have in common—and of course the Czechoslovaks had them first. I assume it's coincidental—I can't imagine Martin Webster wanting to copy anything to do with Czechoslovakia—other than making it his "last territorial claim in Europe".

He might, however, envy its size. The National Front of the CSSR has a membership of 29,000,000, a member of its staff told me—with a smile. The fact that this total is 13,500,000 higher than the entire population of Czechoslovakia is, however, no case of ballot-rigging: it's the combined membership of all the thirty-nine attiliated organisations, and there's a fair bit of overlap, most Communist Party members, for instance, also being members of the affiliated trade unions. It's safe to say, though, that there can be very few people of



ABOVE: National Front HQ, Czechoslovakia

Spot the difference



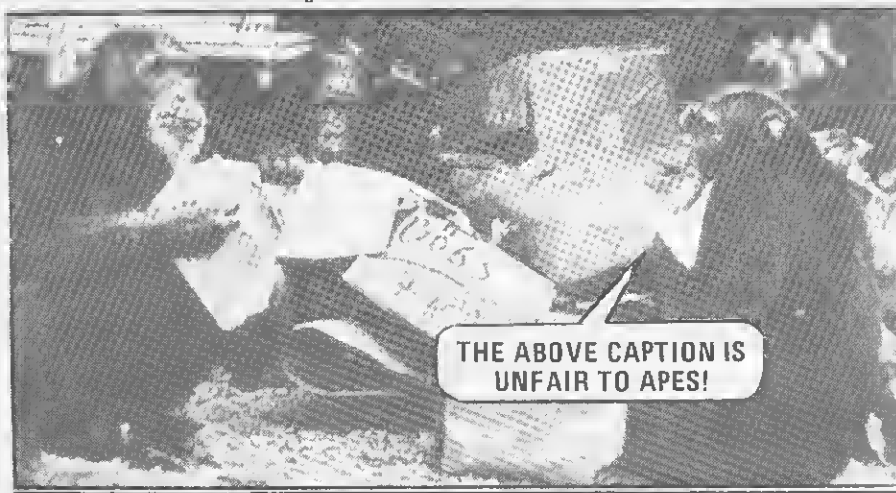
RIGHT: National Front HQ, Britain, as seen by the anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight*

Spot the difference

A meeting of activists in the National Front in Czechoslovakia



A meeting of activists in the National Front in Britain



voting age (18+) in the CSSR who aren't members of some organisation affiliated to the National Front, and as such able to influence its deliberations.

Nor is there any great shortage of people to help in its work. Mr Semko, whom I met at the NF's Prague offices, one of a very limited number of paid full-time employees; the National Front's administration is carried out in the main by volunteer workers numbering about 100,000. And about three-quarters of these are manual workers or farmers, though thanks to their role in the

administration of the country they would no doubt qualify in the eyes of the Socialist Workers Party and other Trotskyist groups as "bureaucrats" or even "state capitalists".

The aim of the National Front, as it was put to me, is "to bring together different classes, citizens' organisations and so on, and to strengthen the unity of the different nations and nationalities in Czechoslovakia." It does this via joint discussions on all matters of political, economic and social importance, and by organising the selection of candidates at all levels. Opponents of Czechoslovak socialism might refer to this as a form of "rigging"—which is far from the case, except in the sense that the National Front "rigs" elections in favour of working people, and that all working people have a right to take part in the "rigging". That's not sinister enough for some: here, for instance is a statement about the 1971 elections:

"... the party leadership had already decided what the percentage of affirmative votes would be, and that district electoral commissions would be issued with the results in their particular constituencies beforehand."
(Kusin, page 159)

Can anybody really take this seriously? Nobody, not even Pinochet in Chile, would be so foolish as to go so far in blatant rigging. And the "source" of this "information" was the then tiny and now non-existent "socialist movement of Czechoslovak citizens" (anti-socialist groups in socialist countries often claim to be defenders of socialism— as did, for instance, Solzhenitsyn, till he finally let his extreme right-wing cat out of the bag). How is such a group supposed to have come across such closely guarded secrets? And how come they failed to furnish the details? The simple fact is that it's a work of fiction.

It's a work of fiction of the sort that's all too readily believed in Britain, if only because people are so blissfully unaware of the involvement of the people in the CSSR and other socialist countries in the choice of candidate— yes, there is indeed only one candidate for each seat; there's one of the few true statements made in Britain about the election of deputies in Czechoslovakia.

But it's far from being the whole truth. For each candidate who ends up with his or her name on a ballot paper, (and it's "her" in about one third of cases) there are several other nominations discussed by numerous organisations and the population in general. Nominations are put forward by the various bodies within the National Front, and all these have to submit themselves to committees and the general public before their name finally goes on the ballot form. As such, the actual election is more of a vote of confidence or test of the accuracy of the expressed public opinion in the run-up.

Far from being less democratic than our own system, this can allow

for a far greater degree of public involvement in the choice of councillors and MPs. After all, in Britain there is only a measure of party membership involvement in selection within one of the four major parties—the Labour Party. Otherwise, you are faced with a choice between a number of candidates most of whom are totally unknown to you and in whose selection you played no part. In the 1970 general election, for instance, if you were an opponent of the EEC, the “freedom of choice” presented to you was more than a little limited. In many constituencies it was a choice between a Labour candidate who was pro-EEC, a Tory candidate who was very pro-EEC and a Liberal candidate who was fanatically pro-EEC.

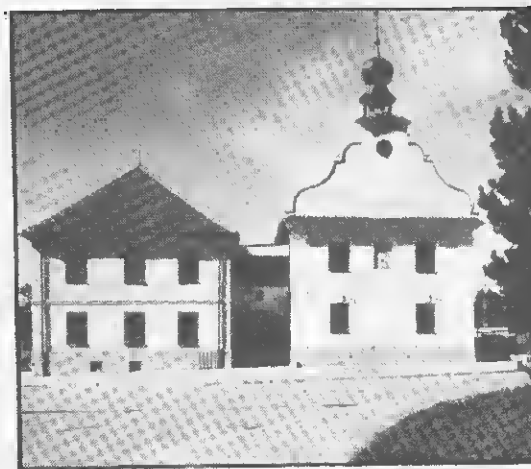
In Czechoslovakia, no candidate gets on the ballot form without giving account to a public meeting of the entire electorate; failure to win approval there means selection of another candidate. Even given all this, it can occur that a candidate fails to get the necessary majority of “yes” votes on polling day. This is very rare, though it sometimes occurs at lower levels of government, and it simply means a re-run of the whole procedure. Not that you’re guaranteed a seat for your whole five-year term. Elected representatives at all levels are expected to hold not just surgeries but regular half-yearly public meetings at which they must give account of their work—and at which they could be, at least theoretically, sacked.

The involvement of the broad-based National Front means that it’s possible to choose an elected body far more representative of the people as a whole than our own Parliament or the US Congress (which contains not a single manual worker). When, say, a city council is up for election, the city-wide organisation of the NF discusses the balance of the whole council with each ward organisation; thus the city ends up with a council in which it is made sure that all political parties are represented, and that, more or less without exception, the majority of elected representatives are workers, whether from industry or co-operative farm.

The same sort of balance is obtained at all levels up to and including the Federal Assembly; although there, and at the levels of the Slovak National Council and the Czech National Council, there are specific considerations on the representation of national minorities, which I’ll come to in a later chapter. It applies at the level of the Prague and Bratislava councils (rough equivalents of our own scrapped GLC) and the councils of Ostrava, Plzen, Brno and Kosice (rough equivalents to our scrapped metropolitan counties, but, as with Prague and Bratislava, under no threat of extinction). It also applies in the municipal districts within these and in the 6,000 other town and village councils throughout the CSSR, though obviously the smaller the scale the more difficult to produce so exact a balance.

(I should perhaps explain that the Czechoslovaks manage to confuse us foreigners by calling all these councils, from village to regional,

Even small towns like Borovany can have fairly impressive council offices, as seen here



“national committees”. There are historical reasons for this in the anti-fascist struggle; personally I think that translation as “committees of the nation” or “people’s committees”—“people” and “nation” can be translated as the same word in Czech and Slovak—would be simpler. To keep it simpler still, I think I’ll stick to “councils”.)

The election of deputies to these bodies at all levels doesn’t produce some bureaucratic caste of professional politicians; the vast majority of representatives continue in their normal jobs and at normal wages—with, of course, expenses and paid time off when performing their duties. Of course, for some councillors, it’s necessarily a full-time job; Prague 4 council leader Zdenek Dedic told me that six out of 191 members of the council were employed full-time. In Czechoslovakia, though, such workers are guaranteed their previous jobs back if they cease full-time council employment.

But while the majority of elected representatives may be “amateurs”, they are nevertheless expected to carry out their duties “professionally”. In 1984 in Prague, for instance, 900 councillors were taking part in courses, of two or three-year duration, on various subjects relating to local government. There are also shorter courses in local government law and administration attended by literally thousands of councillors and council employees. An important consideration is the very high proportion of young councillors serving their first term of office.

For instance, when Prague 4 deputy council leader Pavel Volf was first elected as a councillor, he was a factory worker; he now has a law degree. This certainly doesn’t seem to be anything unusual in Czechoslovakia—though in Britain a factory worker’s chances of becoming a lawyer are to say the least limited. It’s certainly a sign of the sort of work and dedication expected of councillors in Czechoslovakia, and the closeness to people’s everyday problems that’s

expected of them. For instance, the Prague 4 council office receives an average of almost 5,000 visitors every day it's open, wanting answers to innumerable questions and solutions to countless problems. Nor are councillors "safe" when they're away from the building; the vast majority live in the areas they represent and are well-known to the local population. Zdenek Dedic told me that he is regularly stopped in the streets with complaints such as "What's that pile of rubbish doing there?" or "Why isn't that shop open?" Councillors have to provide answers to such questions all the time; they also have the responsibility of explaining all important changes in the country to their constituents. This included justifying the 1984 increase in the price of beer—an unenviable task!

But if it's no easy job being a people's representative at the local level in Czechoslovakia, some would have you believe that at the higher level it's an easy ride. Here, for instance, is the comment of the former East European Correspondent of *The Economist*:

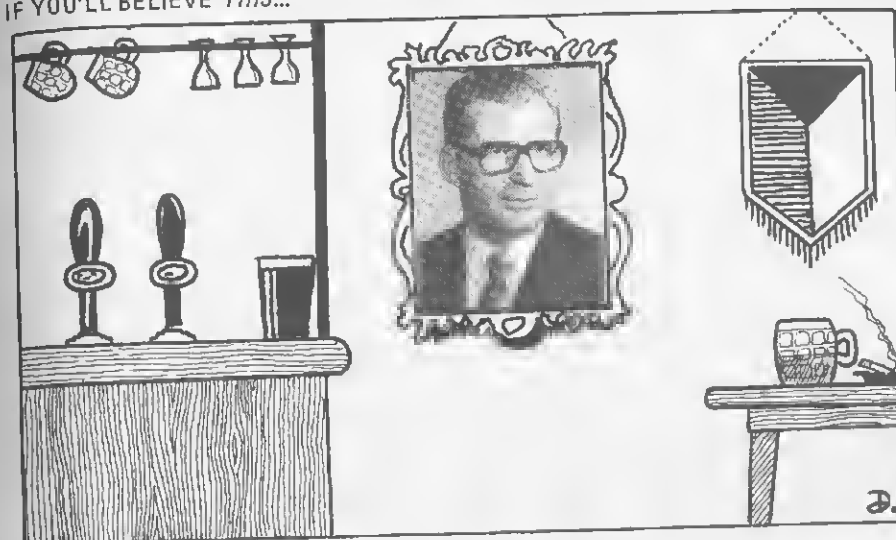
"There are some rather good soap operas on television, but you won't see party and government officials having to defend their policies and political records from sceptical questioners . . ."
(Christopher Cviic, *"East Versus West"*, BBC Publications, 1984)

I can't comment on the soap operas (though the juxtaposition seems me to be a deliberate slight on "party and government officials") and I've not seen enough Czechoslovak television to comment specifically on the rest. But I have before me as I write an English translation (in *Czechoslovak Life*) of a lengthy interview that appeared in the Communist Party daily *Rude Pravo* on April 17, 1985. The interviewer was Swedish journalist Curt Carlson and the interviewee was Vasil Bilak, who certainly qualifies as a leading official of both Party and government.

The interviewer was certainly polite, but unquestionably sceptical and frank. The answers he received were equally frank. Bilak was taken to task and indeed took his questioner to task on a number of occasions. It was a far livelier interview than you'd expect between, say, Margaret Thatcher and the sycophantic Brian Walden or Sir Alastair Burnet of our own media. And there it was, for millions to read, in the pages of *Rude Pravo*.

Some people try and present the role of leading Communists differently, as all-pervasive ikon-figures. Zdena Tomin's skit in her ITV schools programme showed us a framed photograph of prime minister Lubomir Strougal—on the wall of a pub! It's true that in government buildings and offices as well as other institutions you will see framed photographs of President Husak, but you are as likely to find his or comrade Strougal's portrait prominently displayed in a bar as you are to be shadowed in the same bar by large gentlemen in raincoats—

IF YOU'LL BELIEVE THIS...



...THEN YOU SHOULD BELIEVE THIS



(There's no reason why the latter shouldn't be true; many breweries in Britain donate tens of thousands of pounds to the Conservative Party every year)

whatever Mrs Tomin would like you to think.

But if party leaders are not the objects of idolatry (and hanging on a pub wall is in any case hardly a sign of respect) nor are they the objects of contempt that some writing in the west make them out to be, such

as the two following dismissive, not to mention insulting, references:

"Gustav Husak, a clever small-town lawyer and petty provincial politician..."
(A H Hermann, *"A History of the Czechs"*, Allen Lane/Penguin, 1975, page 285)

"Gustav Husak, an able man with no democratic inclinations..."
(Christopher Cviic, *"East Versus West"*, BBC Publications, 1984)

At least both admit Dr Husak's intelligence. It's not, however, surprising that someone like Mr Hermann, whose book title makes no mention of the Slovak nation, should consider Dr Husak's background as "provineial" (that is, he is a Slovak). But neither gentleman makes any reference to his background. Its "petty provincial" nature lies in the fact that during the Second World War Dr Husak, having previously been arrested and jailed several times by the Nazis, became a member of the fifth underground leadership of the Communist Party of Slovakia—the previous four leaderships having been totally exterminated by the Nazis. To describe a leader of an underground anti-fascist movement, living under permanent danger of capture, torture and death as either petty or lacking in democratic inclinations strikes me as worse than petty and lacking in inclination towards honesty.

People in Czechoslovakia, and perhaps particularly in Slovakia, don't share the contempt of such critics. When I visited the Museum of the Slovak National Uprising (against the Nazis in 1944, with Dr Husak as

What's the connection?



1940s anti-Nazi resistance leader...



...and 1980s President. Work it out!

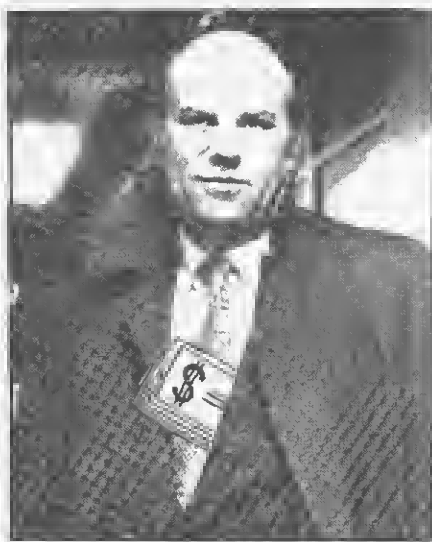
one of its leaders) in Banska Bystrica, the young woman who showed me a 1940s photograph of underground leaders, including an unshaven Gustav Husak, displayed genuine admiration: "That's our President—he was only thirty at the time!" A similar respect was obvious at a film show at the museum, where many stage whispers of his name by schoolchildren greeted his appearance on the screen. If anyone thinks that's brainwashing, perhaps it's only because it's difficult to imagine similar respect for our political leaders (though, sadly for convinced republicans as myself, such hushed respect can still be found for our hereditary unelected Head of State). And it has to be admitted that, as might well be expected from schoolkids, the young audience in Banska Bystrica displayed even more enthusiasm on the appearance of the cosmonaut Vladimir Remek—the first non-US, non-Soviet citizen in space.

President Husak's predecessor, Ludvik Svoboda, was the target of an even greater insult than those quoted above when he was referred to as "that arch-traitor" in the 1975 book, *"The Frolik Defection"*. This failed to mention that General Svoboda had been head of the Czechoslovak armed forces which, as an independent battalion and later as an independent brigade, took part in the fighting on the Eastern Front, alongside the Soviet Army, from 1943 on. Under his command, Czechoslovak soldiers advancing to aid the Slovak National Uprising were the first to liberate Czechoslovak territory and then took part in the struggle that followed throughout the country.

Nor was he a desk-bound officer but an active combat commander. Some traitor! (Mind you, the author of the book, Joseph Frolik, knows a thing or two about treason. He claims to have been a senior Czechoslovak intelligence officer prior to his defection to the United States. That defection took place, on his own admission, only after it was made clear that the Central Intelligence Agency was prepared not only not to "punish" defecting "enemy agents" but to protect them and reward them—which they did handsomely in his case. Some patriot!)

Yet to some people, the notion of democracy is interwoven with the ability to express such unfounded Frolik-style insults. In the interview I referred to earlier, Swedish journalist Curt Carlson argued that any Swede "can openly criticise the Swedish Prime Minister, asserting that he is a blackguard, crook or liar." Can a Czechoslovak citizen, he asked, say the same about his Prime Minister or President?

"Is it an example of freedom and democracy when a citizen can talk about a prime minister as a blackguard, crook or liar?" replied Bilak. "You are right, this cannot be said in Czechoslovakia, because a blackguard, crook or liar cannot become Prime Minister in our country. The above characteristics cannot apply to a Czechoslovak President or Prime Minister. They are representatives of the people and not of some gang. To accuse someone without grounds of being a blackguard, crook



Traitor or patriot?

According to the man on the right (politically, as well as on this page), the man on the left (again in both senses) was an "arch-traitor". The Czechoslovak Government does not, however, give as many medals as those seen here on the breast of the late General Ludvik Svoboda for betraying one's country.

In the case of the other man, defector Josef Frolík, some claim can be made to "patriotism", though what country he's being patriotic to is another matter. Indeed, in Mr Frolík's case the word should really be spelt PAY-triotic, and the people supplying the pay are the US Central Intelligence Agency.

or liar has nothing to do with freedom. It is, of course, slander which is punishable. If someone used such insults against you, you would surely sue him for slander or defamation of character, and with justification."

It is indeed a strange concept of democracy that thinks that the right to call political leaders names is one of its higher aspects. Nor is it something that can necessarily be done all that freely. But making fun of political figures is not the same as having the ability to change their policies or indeed exercise any control over the running of the country. No changes in government policy in Britain have ever been brought about Mike Yarwood, Janet Brown or, for that matter, Jasper Carrot; no government has yet been brought down by *Private Eye*, *Spitting Image* or *That Was The Week That Was*.

Without wanting to belittle the value of any of those as entertainment or satire, their main effective function is as a safety valve

for people's frustrations with government. And there's a regrettable sign of the times in Margaret Thatcher's choice of favourite TV programme. When, some years ago, Tony Benn argued that ministers are manipulated by senior civil servants of the Old School Tie Brigade, he received the usual media accusations of paranoia and lunacy. Yet now it's possible for the prime minister to name as her favourite programme one that illustrates just how right Tony Benn was: "Yes, Minister".

(It's true that the criticism implied in the programme is of bureaucracy rather than the ruling-class nature of the state, including the Civil Service. Criticism, and indeed satirising, of bureaucracy occurs in Czechoslovakia as in other socialist countries; but it cannot be based on the upper-class nature of the "bureaucrats", because the majority of top civil servants—and politicians—in socialist countries are of working class origin.)

But if some people in Britain and elsewhere have the strange idea that democracy means the right to ridicule rather than to run society, an even stranger attitude is prevalent with the Thatchers, Tebbits, Kings and Lord Youngs of this world when it comes to trade unions. These are seen as acting contrary to democracy, the role of the latter being to limit their powers as much as possible. Yet when it comes to the socialist countries, the more than can be done to disrupt the economy (as with Solidarnosc in Poland) the better—and the "official" unions are accused of not doing enough against their governments—and not, indeed, being real trade unions at all. Nor is this view exclusive to Conservatives:

Czechoslovakia: Unions nominally independent but totally controlled.

(Map 36. New State of the World Atlas. Kidron and Segal)

If Britain's current Conservative Government gets its way, the above would be a fair description of trade unions in our country. But is it really an accurate description of Czechoslovakia's Revolutionary Trade Union Movement (or ROH, to give it its Czech and Slovak initials)? If it is, it means that 7,000,000 people are involved, largely unknown to themselves, in a conspiracy to give the appearance of trade unionism without the substance.

It's true that in many ways trade unions in Czechoslovakia and other socialist countries differ from our own. For instance, trade unions in Czechoslovakia are responsible for the administration of sick pay—although all funding is provided by the state. Trade unions also organise holidays for their members and own holiday camps and entire resorts—including abroad, as, for instance, in Bulgaria. Over one in three trade unionists every year take holidays at trade union facilities, with two-thirds or sometimes as much as three-quarters or even all the cost being provided by the union. Unions also finance children's holidays in

Swimming pools, like this one here, are just one of the many types of leisure and holiday facilities controlled by the trade unions



“Pioneer Camps”, and various sporting, health and physical training holidays and courses.

But what of the sort of functions that you would expect to see being carried out by trade unions in our own country? What about negotiating wage increases?

“Neither are prices forced up by trade union pressure. First of all, it is not within the unions’ remit to do such a thing, their assignment being to make workers work harder and to dispense to them some fringe benefits in return.”
(Kusin, page 299)

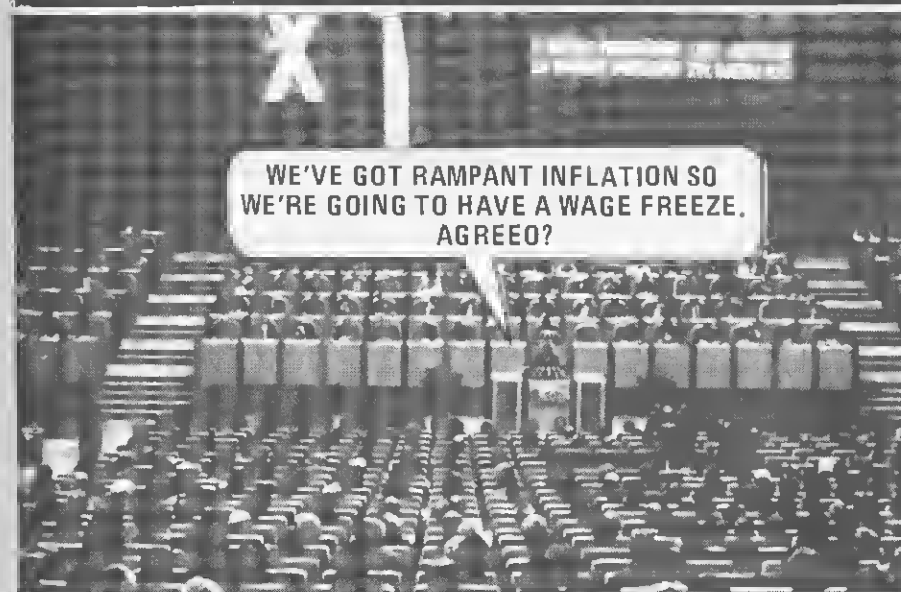
That sounds to me remarkably like the “Social Contract” between the Labour Government and the TUC in Britain in the late 1970s—except that I don’t remember any “fringe benefits” being granted in return for the effective wage freeze in which the unions collaborated with the government; promised, yes—granted, no. But while there might be some justification for labelling the relationship between government and unions in Czechoslovakia a “social contract”, it’s at the level of labels that the resemblance ends.

For instance, if wages aren’t “forced up” they’re certainly not forced

down; the average wage in the CSSR is now about three times what it was at the beginning of the 1950s—a period in which there has been little or no increase in the cost of the basic necessities of life. People in capitalist countries have to struggle for wage increases not so much to improve their living standards as just to keep pace with inflation—and many fail to do even that. Such is the pressure of unemployment in Britain that in some areas workers have “negotiated” freezes (that is, effective cuts) in wages, or in some cases actual cash decreases, just in order to stay in a job.

That’s not what happens in Czechoslovakia. Despite the fictitious restrictions placed by Mr Kusin on the “unions’ remit”, national levels of wages are fixed annually and as part of each five-year plan on the basis of negotiations between the unions and the government. And, as bonuses averaging 25 per cent on top of the basic wage form part of workers’ incomes, these are negotiated at plant level by elected union representatives of the workers.

As to “making workers work harder”, Mr Kusin presumably has in mind the undoubted fact that trade unions in Czechoslovakia as in other socialist countries take an active part in ensuring the carrying out of economic planning, at national and local level. But as no such plans at either level would ever be made without the detailed involvement and agreement of the trade unions, and as the benefits of increased productivity return to working people as a whole, rather than resulting



Something you *won't* hear at the congress of the Revolutionary Trade Union Movement

we'd see a lot less strikes here—and in Czechoslovakia, the miners' strike need never have occurred (and again, more of that later).

When, then, can disputes arise? If, for instance, management is in breach of health and safety regulations laid down by law and with the agreement of the unions. If such a problem cannot be settled at local level, the union simply refers it to the next highest level—an arbitration commission set up by the trade union itself, which has the power to decide the issue and impose its decision. In serious cases of breach of safety rules, failure to pay agreed bonuses, failure to pay agreed compensation for industrial injury and so on, managers can be in higher profits and less jobs, that's hardly surprising. It hardly fits in with Mr Kusin's implication of "speed-up".

But if trade unions in Czechoslovakia are involved in a far more meaningful form of co-operation with the Government than could ever hope to be seen under a system of private ownership, that doesn't mean that they cease to act as defenders of the day-to-day interests of the working people. The all-round task of the trade union movement was described by ROH chairman Karel Hoffmann in a speech reported in *Rude Pravo* on 19 December, 1984;

"It also applies to the present that only a united, strong trade union organisation is capable of fulfilling its mission—to defend the class as well as the specific concrete interests of working people and to contribute effectively to the development of society."

Defending those "class interests" and "specific concrete interests" involves, from time to time, disputes. Does this mean that strikes then take place? Other than in highly exceptional circumstances, no. Does that mean, as some people (including those who'd like to see strikes banned in Britain) will tell you, that strikes are illegal? No. As Jiri Richter of ROH's Central Trade Union School in Prague told me, "The right to strike is not specifically included in the Constitution, but then again nowhere is it banned." On the other hand, it would take an incredibly irresponsible management to provoke a strike. What, after all, are the main causes of strikes in Britain? Protection of living standards, working conditions and jobs. The 1984-85 miners' strike was partly over the fact that miners' wages had fallen against the cost of living, and drastically down the "league table", but mainly over the threat to tens of thousands of jobs from the MacGregor management. Such situations simply don't occur in Czechoslovakia.

For instance, as I was told at the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, nobody can be made redundant without being given another job at an equivalent level and wages—more of which in later chapters—and as far as individual sackings go, as Ladislav Urbanek at the ROH School told me, "without the agreement of the factory committee, no-one could be sacked." If in Britain living standards rose continually in a situation with most prices frozen, and no employer could sack a worker without the agreement of the shop stewards' committee,

disciplined or even dismissed.

Comrade Harel, the ROH chairman at the Nosek mine outside Kladno in Central Bohemia, told me that if circumstances arose that the union's safety representatives considered a serious danger or health hazard, they had the right to simply shut down work in the section involved until the situation was rectified. He didn't talk of this as if it was a strike—simply a right belonging to the union. Such stoppages, though, are very rare, and when they occur are reported immediately to the next highest union level and to management; in his five years as union chairman in the pit only one such stoppage had been necessary.

Nor can there be any demarcation disputes between members of different unions, because in Czechoslovakia these take the form of industrial unions. All workers in a given enterprise, from cleaners to top management, are members of the same union. And this also means that if one particular group in a factory, say, the electricians, find their specific conditions unsatisfactory, they can call on all other sections to back their case as members of the same union.

But if in some ways the difference with unions in Britain is that their Czechoslovak counterparts actually have more powers, which to me is in itself a sign of democracy, how are the trade unions themselves organised? I've been told in the past by people on both right and left that trade unions in socialist countries are not run democratically and their leaders are not elected. This might come as a surprise to the hundreds of thousands of people holding elective office in ROH's more than 25,000 branches, thousands of district, area and regional committees and national and federal bodies.

These people are elected at the lowest level every two or three years to fit in with elections at higher levels on a five-yearly basis. I can't speak as an eye-witness to this process; as Maria Glaserova at the ROH School told me, "I'm sorry you weren't here last week!" Nominations for the trade union body of the employees at the School had been distributed, discussed and voted on. Nominations are discussed in every section within a workplace and then a list of recommended nominations agreed by the outgoing workplace committee and put forward to a union meeting of all members. If that sounds bureaucratic, it's pretty similar to the way my amalgamated union branch operated when I was a Post Office worker.

However, workers aren't obliged to rubber-stamp the outgoing committee's recommendations: it not only can but does happen that people cross out some of the names on the ballot form (voting is by secret ballot after discussion) and write in the names of others they want to see elected. These count as fully valid votes within the unions' rules. And only elected representatives have the right to run unions and take decisions on behalf of the members. It was stressed to me that appointed officials only have the right to administer, not control, the unions.

To me this doesn't sound like a sham—and with the detailed work that goes into union democracy at all levels it would be a very expensive and time-consuming sham if it were. More likely it seems a serious attempt to put into effect the attitude of ROH's founder, Antonin Zapotocky, as referred to by Karel Hoffman:

"Comrade Zapotocky succinctly pointed out that the trade unions were a live organism constantly pulsating from bottom to top and from top to bottom, an organism nourished by the active interest and conscious activity of its members. He was thus expressing the demand for the permanent activity of the entire movement as well as of each branch, something for which the Revolutionary Trade Union Movement has again been striving since the Eighth Trade Union Congress. It is more than ever valid that lasting activity is not caused by a mere shifting of the movement from one action to another but by the unfolding of such activities which will convince the membership that the organisation is doing precisely what is in the interests of its members, what leads to both effective participation and administration, in solving economic, political and state affairs, as well as the application of their own rights and the satisfaction of their needs."

The English of that translation may be a bit cumbersome, but the meaning is quite clear: it's the talk of socialist trade unionism. And there's one other aspect of that same trade unionism that took me by surprise in Czechoslovakia, though it's a vital part of its democratic content: internationalism.

You may have heard of the miners' families invited to Czechoslovakia from Britain during the great strike of 1984-85. You may have heard of the large contribution by Czechoslovak trade unionists to the 200-tonne shipment of food that arrived in Britain from the Scandinavian and socialist countries in October 1984. What you may not have known—I didn't—was that this solidarity was far from being a one-off affair. Just as Britain's Post Office very occasionally issues "charity stamps" where a small amount over the cost of postage goes to some deserving cause, so in Czechoslovakia you can buy "solidarity stamps"—but these are stuck not on letters but in your union card. These represent voluntary contributions towards ROH's International Solidarity Fund. Most of the proceeds goes on trade union education in developing countries, though it also supports such causes as our miners' strike and on occasion material aid to disaster areas. About 40 million "solidarity stamps" are bought each year, representing an average contribution of about 25 crowns per union member.

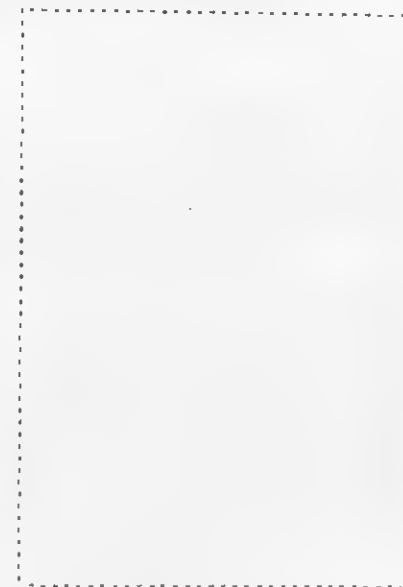
We could use such a scheme in Britain; apart from anything else, it would be a good indication of a trade unionist's dedication to the movement internationally. The comrades that I met at the ROH School showed me their well-stamped cards; they certainly passed the test.

(Incidentally, the committee elected at the meeting that I missed so

narrowly was predominantly made up of women; that's a vital aspect of democracy that I've only touched on yet—the representation of the female majority of the population. More on that later).



LEFT: the daily paper of the Socialist Party in Czechoslovakia. RIGHT: the daily paper of the Labour Party in Britain (long awaited)

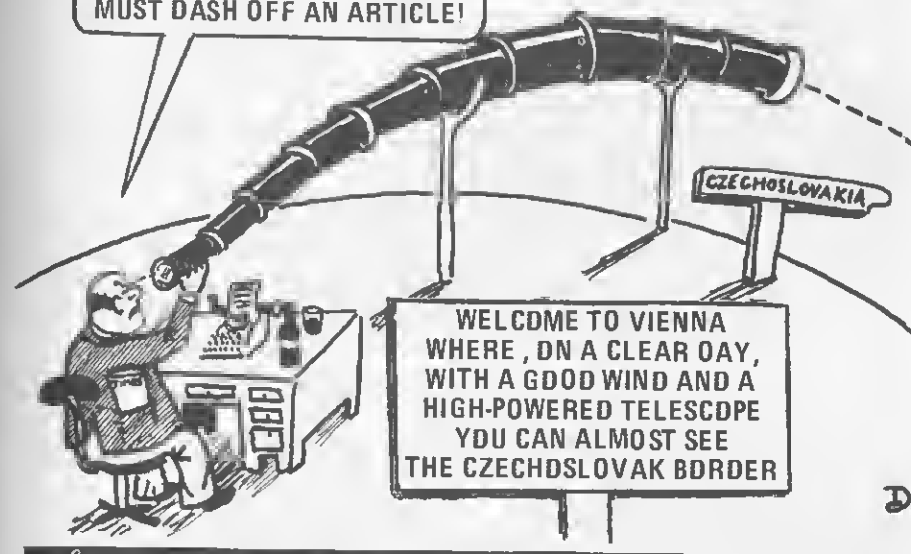


I THINK POLITICIANS SHOULDN'T
INTERFERE IN CHURCH MATTERS.
DON'T YOU AGREE?

YES, SIR,
CERTAINLY, SIR!



I SPY WITH MY LITTLE EYE—
RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION!
MUST DASH OFF AN ARTICLE!



Chapter 5: For God's sake!

"... the treatment of religious believers in Czechoslovakia is worse than in other Eastern European members of the Warsaw Pact."
(Times editorial, 30 May, 1984)

Quite apart from the usual description of Central European Czechoslovakia as in "Eastern Europe", this statement, if not deliberate disinformation, is at best based on ignorance. Unfortunately, the ignorance is plainly wilful. The same editorial spoke of the impending visit to Britain of Mr Vladimir Janku, head of the Czechoslovak government's secretariat for Church affairs. *The Times* confidently predicted a whitewash job from Mr Janku, whom it clearly considered a slick bureaucrat. While willing to state in advance (and most inventively) what he was going to say, *The Times* didn't bother to find out what he did say; no report appeared, and I doubt if a single *Times* reporter met or questioned him. Had they done so, as I did in Czechoslovakia, they would have found him a charming man with flawless English in which

he speaks of churchmen that he knows in Czechoslovakia and Britain with not only respect but even affection.

But if *The Times* has never encountered Vladimir Janku, it did have at least one correspondent at the world peace assembly in Prague in 1983. Their correspondent must have seen one of the most popular pamphlets on display at the assembly, which gave details of the eighteen churches practising their religion in Czechoslovakia (that's eighteen denominations, not buildings!) and specifically listing the times of all services of all churches in Prague.

Many people found this difficult to believe, and actually went along to find out for themselves. Some, on finding services going on with congregations present, were so ultra-sceptical as to assume this was all specially laid on for the benefit of foreign visitors, with Party members posing as believers to create the illusion of religious freedom. For all I know, the *Times* correspondent may have been daft enough to believe this; if you are, you might as well stop reading here—though, if so, I expect you already have.

According to Dr Miroslav Novak, Patriarch of the Czechoslovak Hussite Church (named after the 15th-century radical protestant and democrat Jan Hus), this is no uncommon occurrence. Many visitors to Czechoslovakia, he said, in an interview with *Czechoslovak Life* in January 1985, "get up early one day to see whether there are masses held in churches and chapels, and whether believers are present". Although he pointed out that many more people visit the country with a more serious approach to the question of religion, "some of them still arrive with the belief that it is forbidden to go to church in our country".

(Dr Novak also referred to a group of Dutch students he had met, who came out with the usual misinformation about suppression of religion, expressing great concern about it. Yet in reply to his assumption that they were all believers, they all admitted to being non-churchgoers—and perhaps began to see how their ideas were being manipulated.) Some sources of misinformation don't actually, however, go quite so far as to suggest that religion is actually *banned* in the CSSR, but just a very risky thing to get involved in:

"Policemen can often be spotted watching the entrances to churches during the few hours of the week when the buildings are open for services."

(Richard Bassett, The Times, 18 June, 1985)

This statement would be ludicrous even if it weren't datelined *Vienna*! It's doubtless as accurate as the reports on Kampuchea that come out of Bangkok. In fact, having heard such statements before (though never expecting such nonsense from *The Times*, even under the Murdoch regime) I made a point of looking myself. I've seen people entering and

leaving churches in Czechoslovakia on several occasions—and not just on Sundays—and even on one occasion entered a church myself as a service was ending. I was even foolish enough to look around for police cars and bulky characters in leather overcoats. As I fitted into that latter category myself on some of these occasions, I may even have become the source of Mr Bassett's tale in the eyes of some paranoid churchgoer—but I saw no-one else to arouse such suspicions.

(Mr Bassett's concern for freedom of conscience didn't apparently extend to the country from which he was so inaccurately reporting—Austria—in whose constitution there are actually legal penalties for those spreading atheistic ideas).

Perhaps, then, life for Christians is nevertheless made more difficult by restrictions placed on the number of churches and priests, and upon their activities, without actual police surveillance? *The Times* (not again!) tells all:

"... a serious shortage of priests—3,175 in a country of 15m people and some 4,300 churches."

(The Times, 12 April, 1985)

The figures that I've got are a little different: 8,230 churches, chapels, synagogues and other houses of worship with a total of almost



Trainee priests studying theology—not Marxism

6,000 clerics. *The Times* perhaps had in mind the Roman Catholic Church alone, though it unfairly failed to point out that about one third of Czechoslovakia's Christians are outside that particular denomination; the second and third largest churches, the Hussite Church, and the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren, are both protestant. But even just for Catholics, *The Times's* figures understate the number of churches by 700. What would surprise most people in Britain is that not only are all the churches maintained by the state at the cost of hundreds of millions of crowns each year, but the salaries of the clergymen are also paid by the state.

The state also maintains the six theological colleges currently giving tuition to some 700-odd future priests. This is a very different situation to Britain; although we have a state-sponsored church, much of its income comes from property ownership, including a large part of Soho, which gives rise to the not altogether untrue joke about the Church of England being the biggest brothel-keeper in the country (though much of its Soho landholding has been sold off). But some see the financial assistance given to the Church in Czechoslovakia as being not so much a sign of toleration as control:

"Clerical posts were filled by 'patriotic priests', subservient to the Communists and active in the Soviet-sponsored international 'peace' campaign in the 1950s."
(*Collier's Encyclopedia*)

If support for 'peace' (and the quotation marks are a sign of contempt for such a concept) is a sign of being "Soviet-sponsored", then the bishops of Collier's US homeland have obviously gone over to the Kremlin; their support for a nuclear freeze is shared by the USSR. But then, even in the Cold War days of the 1950s, many western priests were involved in peace work—why not Czechoslovaks?

But behind the sinister implications of the use of the word "patriotic"—implying lack of religious conviction—there is one simple fact: Churches in Czechoslovakia, if they wish to have the benefits outlined above and the right to hold public services and gatherings, must be prepared to state their acceptance of the country's constitution. When Czechoslovakia was a part of Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Catholic Church had special privileges given by the state, while the protestants were consequently disadvantaged. No such privileges exist now; all churches are considered equal, and all churches, just like all citizens, are expected to accept the Constitution, which entails the separation of Church and State.

Those not prepared to accept the Constitution—for instance, Jehovah's Witnesses—can't expect to get the same rights and facilities as other churches; nor do they get them. Czechoslovakian citizens have duties as well as rights under the Constitution, and no Church is allowed to

expect its members to be exempted from them.

This doesn't strike me as religious discrimination, in fact the opposite. Yet, paradoxically, it is often those countries whose leaders and media are most critical of such supposed discrimination that practise a much more real sort themselves. No less than forty-three capitalist countries have "official" state churches, including Britain; fourteen of them are, unlike ours, Roman Catholic. Presidents and members of parliament in numerous countries are expected to take a religious oath on accession, thus discriminating against members of other faiths or atheists; numerous official ceremonies include religious ceremonies or references, not least in the United States despite that country's declaration of separation of church and state as long ago as 1831.

The United States adopted "In God We Trust" as its official motto in 1956; the constitutions of 42 states of the Union contain references to God, as does the Declaration of Independence. In some States, such as New Jersey and Maryland, evidence in courts is not accepted without a religious oath (in Britain there is the alternative of "affirming") and North Carolina, Mississippi, Texas and Arkansas are among states that will not allow anyone not prepared to swear a religious oath to hold any elected office.

There is no such discrimination in Czechoslovakia; though obviously as church affairs secretariat head Vladimír Janku told me, "If you're a communist, you'll never get to be a bishop—and if you're a priest you'll never get to be secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party!" He did suggest, however, that you'd be unlikely to find any Christians as, for instance, teachers of natural sciences. The state in Czechoslovakia lays it down that the teaching of such subjects should be along scientific materialist lines, and the introduction of "religious" explanations for natural phenomena is not accepted. That's part of what is meant by separation of church and state.

If that sounds discriminatory (though I think it's a perfectly reasonable and sensible approach), it's much preferable to the "even-handed" approach adopted in a number of states of the US over recent years—with the full backing of Ronald Reagan. Under this approach the teaching of evolution has to be "balanced" by an equal amount of time spent teaching the "theory" of "creationism"—that is, the first chapters of Genesis as literal truth! Thus, a universally-accepted scientific truth is treated with no more respect than a version not only different from most of the world's religions but not accepted as literally true by most Christians! That's not balance—that's obscurantism. In Czechoslovakia, people are free to go to church to find various religious explanations for humanity's presence on earth; in school the poor deprived souls will have to settle for the scientific version.

To me that's a much clearer sign of freedom of belief than the situation in Britain. Here, there is only one subject that specifically by law must be taught in schools; it's not one of the three R's—it's the

fourth: Religion. And despite all the talk about a multi-cultural society, schools in Britain are still required to hold a daily assembly with a Christian act of worship. Opting out isn't as easy as you might think—and it wouldn't occur to most parents—nor is there any real provision for any alternative religions or philosophies.

And when the National Union of Teachers in October 1984 dared to circulate a discussion document including such suggestions as the secularisation of school assemblies and a genuinely broad, rather than specifically CofE, religious education, this was immediately criticised by education secretary Sir Keith Joseph; as long as he was in charge, schoolkids would continue to get their daily dose of God (English variety).

It wouldn't be right to suggest that in Czechoslovakia there are no problems in the relations between Church and state; and there certainly have been serious problems in the past. But is the following statement true?

"The anti-religious theatre of war has three main battlegrounds: propaganda, restrictive practice and relations with the Vatican."
(Kusin, page 217)

It's only true that there's a war between Marxism and religion in the sense that the two philosophies compete for people's allegiance; to use the sort of language that Mr Kusin does is to present a picture of aggression and antagonism that would simply be illegal in Czechoslovakia. "We don't have anti-religious propaganda," Vladimir Janku told me. "We have scientific, atheistic propaganda. No-one has the right to attack the church or to speak ill of a priest. But they do have the right to pursue scientific-atheistic propaganda." The sort of anti-Catholic bigotry and incitement to sectarian violence of the Ian Paisleys of this world would not be tolerated in Czechoslovakia. Come to that, I'm not sure they'd even allow "Life of Brian" to be shown, for fear of offending the Christian community. I could see the point of that—though in a country like Britain with an Established Religion, I feel that its ideas are fair game for satire. (In Czechoslovakia, on the other hand, on entry into St Vitus's Cathedral in Prague Castle there are notices instructing men to remove their hats out of respect for believers; and though in a "Marxist state" (as its critics describe it) you'd be in trouble if you didn't.

In Czechoslovakia there is a monthly magazine called *Atheist*, which argues positively for a materialist, scientific world outlook, and in favour of the proposition that the solutions to the problems of the world are to be found in the world itself. To be fair, many Christians would accept that proposition as not incompatible with their religious views, so such a practical approach no doubt also appears in the pages of religious periodicals in Czechoslovakia—of which there are no less

than twenty-seven, including the weekly *Catholic News* in Czech and Slovak, with a print run of 250,000.

When it comes to publishing, the Church can hardly be called "suppressed" in Czechoslovakia. Viewers of Channel 4 News' "Comment" on 25 February, 1985, were told by Czechoslovak press attache Josef Konecny that 200,000 Bibles had been printed in Czechoslovakia in the past year. He might have added that simultaneously 400,000 hymn books and 70,000 catechisms had been

Bible Quiz



QUESTION: Were these bibles produced:

- A: In a country where, according to *The Times*, Christians are persecuted?
- B: In a country where, according to Vladimir Kusin, there is a "religious theatre of war"?
- C: In a country that printed 200,000 more like them in 1984 alone? or
- D: In Czechoslovakia?

Turn page upside-down for answer

The correct answers are A, B, C and D (as if you didn't know!)



Something you won't easily find an English equivalent of—a dictionary of the terminology of scientific atheism and materialism. Indeed, such a book would be illegal in a number of countries counted as part of the "Free World"

printed. I remember the tale of the innocent British businessman (they're always "businessmen") arrested for "smuggling Bibles" into Czechoslovakia in the late 1960s. On his release he admitted to espionage; even the far from pro-Czechoslovak *Private Eye* felt obliged to point out that in the same year as his arrest, the CSSR's state printing house had been turning out Bibles in tens of thousands.

But if in Czechoslovakia "restrictive practices" takes the form of paying priests (and giving them pensions), and if in the "battleground of propaganda" the Church has got a surprising number of guns on its side, what of the "battleground" of relations with the Vatican? Here, it has to be admitted, there have been a remain some difficulties. But of whose making?

The history of relations between the Vatican and the Czechoslovak state (from its inception in 1918) didn't bode too well for a perfect situation at present. The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire opened the way to an end to the Catholic domination over the oppressed Protestant minority. But the Catholic Church didn't like that idea, nor the inclusion of its massive lands in the redistribution under the land reform. When Czechoslovakia's first president, Tomas Masaryk, had the nerve to refer to Hussite traditions in his government programme, the Papal Nuncio was immediately withdrawn from Prague in protest (the Catholic Church having burned Jan Hus at the stake for heresy in 1415).

But if the Masaryk Government didn't live up to its promises of standing up to the Vatican, the situation was still worse under the break-up of Czechoslovakia after the Munich betrayal. While Bohemia and Moravia became a Nazi "protectorate", a supposedly "independent" Slovak state (actually totally dependent on the Nazis) was set up under the Catholic priest Jozef Tiso, later condemned to death in Czechoslovakia according to the principles of the Nuremberg trial of

Nazi and war criminals, at the time received the full backing of the Vatican: "The Holy See welcomes the announcement by Monsignor Tiso, the head of the Slovak State, that he intends to build up Slovakia according to a Christian plan", was the official statement. A Papal Nuncio was despatched to the Nazi-invented "state" with unseemly haste—and remained there with unseemly tenacity as late as three months after liberation from the open Nazi occupation that later took place.

After liberation, and particularly after the socialist revolution of February 1948, relations were little better. Though the National Front declared its support for freedom of religious belief and freedom of conscience immediately following the revolution, this was followed by Vatican opposition to the new government. It broke off negotiations with the Czechoslovak state and a papal decree of 13 July, 1949, proposed excommunication of all Catholics who expressed support for the Communists or even those who merely co-operated with them. Despite this, relations later gradually improved. The state issued a law in 1954 scrapping any entries on official forms enquiring into the religion of those filling them in; no-one applying for a job could be asked their religion. The papacy of John XXIII improved relations further, though one hangover from the past was remain even longer. It was not until 1977 that the Vatican changed the borders of dioceses in Czechoslovakia. Until that date, they conformed to those valid in the pre-1918 Austro-Hungarian Empire, and did not even fit in with the borders of the Czechoslovak state.

All of this as a background, together with continuing anti-Czechoslovak propaganda by Catholic emigres, might lead you to think that Mr Kusin's description of an "anti-religious war" by the state might better be described as an anti-state war by some occupants of the Vatican. It also helps to explain the continuing difficulties despite the good relations enjoyed between the state and the vast majority of priests and Christians.

One problem was over the closure fairly early on of monastic orders when, on the Government's view, their main activity was not religious but anti-state activity. Vladimir Janku told me that there was nothing to prevent an individual living his life according to the principles of St Francis or the rules of the Dominicans; but the consistently anti-state activities of the organised orders in the past would not again be tolerated.

On the other hand, women's orders continue to exist, and their work is accepted as genuinely charitable: the vast majority of them work for the organisation *Caritas*, which, amongst other things, runs homes for retired priests—and is, incidentally, ninety per cent funded by the state.

Vladimir Janku also told me: "We only have five Catholic Bishops despite having twelve dioceses. Who's to blame? We don't think we are. There have been two sessions on the issue with the Vatican recently."

The Vatican's representatives declared that a candidate for bishop can only be someone who has good relations with the state—we agree.” However, he suggested that two candidates put forward by the Vatican as bishops could not but be unacceptable: one had links with the former Tiso regime; another was provocatively nominated for an area with strong Hussite traditions. However, he suggested that there seemed genuine hope for improved relations, and expressed what impressed me as a genuine desire for continued discussions.

One “problem”—as far as some in Vatican circles are concerned—is the peace organisation of Catholic priests, “Pacem in Terris” (Peace on Earth)—that has existed in Czechoslovakia since the early 1970s. Some would like to present this grouping as contrary to the 1982 Vatican statement “Quidem Episcopi” (Some Bishops) that sought to outlaw political activity by priests. Even many Catholics have noted the inconsistent way in which the current Pope, John Paul II, has applied his injunction to priests not to engage in politics. This has meant an instruction to the leading representatives of “liberation theology” not to speak publicly or write anything for publication; it has meant orders to Latin American priests to cease active opposition to dictatorships or, in Nicaragua, participation in government, on pain of excommunication.

On the other hand, the Pope has participated in and encouraged opposition in Poland, and one can't help feeling that if the political activity of members of Pacem in Terris was *against* CSSR government

Christians for peace in Czechoslovakia (right) and in Britain (below)



Some people denounce the priests involved in *Pacem in Terris* (above, right) as not genuine Christians because of their involvement with the peace movement not only in Czechoslovakia but worldwide. But could anyone seriously doubt the sincere Christian beliefs of Paul Oesterreicher, Bruce Kent and Paul Johns of CND? Then why not give the same credit to the sincerity of the Czechoslovak Christian peace movement?

policies, they'd be encouraged too. As it is, it was necessary for Czechoslovakia's bishops to write to the Pope in September 1984 to affirm their belief that Pacem in Terris was acting fully in conformity with Christian principles. The signatories of the letter included Cardinal Frantisek Tomasek of Prague, whom the western media would like to see as a “dissident”, but who himself had participated in the Christian peace movement that preceded Pacem in Terris (itself named after Pope John XXIII's encyclical of 1963).

Of course there are still problems. But nobody can cite a single case of someone out of a job in Czechoslovakia as a result of being a Catholic. It would be good if the same could be said of Northern Ireland where blatant discrimination remains. Unemployment there is incredibly high for economic reasons, but even higher among the two-fifths of the population who are practising Catholics.

(It would be good if you could say the same about Britain, come to that. In January 1985, the recently-appointed chief executive of the Royal National Mission to Deep-Sea Fishermen was sacked: he'd neglected to state that he was a Catholic. Though supposedly non-denominational, the Mission is effectively exclusively Protestant.)

Anyone who thinks that religion in Czechoslovakia is “suppressed” should travel around the countryside in Slovakia, as I did in 1984. Temporary monuments and posters commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising against the Nazis were common enough (as indeed they were in Bohemia and Moravia) but just as common were small roadside Catholic shrines. No “Communist bureaucrats” appear to even have thought of tearing them down. They wouldn't be so stupid.

And if you really think that there exist such “bureaucrats” whose job is hounding Christians, listen to the words spoken to me by a man who would surely qualify as “top bureaucrat”, if such existed, Vladimir Janku:

“Nearly half the funerals in the Czech lands are religious, and more than three-quarters in Slovakia. Of course, it might happen that a Communist dies, and his mother's a believer, and wants him to be buried before God. And why not? Why not?”

“As a socialist society we're fully aware that now and in the future there will be believers, and churches will continue to be a part of socialist society. Maybe some people don't like it, but it's a fact. Believers want to live and are glad to live in a socialist society—we want to see agreement between Christians and society.

“As a communist, I believe that in the future people will feel no need to hold religious beliefs. Believers have the right to think that in future there will be no more Marxism. We both have the right to our belief—let's let the future decide.”

Many Christians, I'm sure, would prefer that attitude to that of a government that calls bishops “cuckoos” when they dare to depart

from their age-old tradition of acting as "the Tory Party at prayer".
That government is our own.



Part Two: Accentuating the positive

In the previous chapters I may not have succeeded in eliminating everything that's negative about life in Czechoslovakia; after all, that's the job of the Czechoslovak people. But I hope that I've corrected a few false impressions, gleaned largely from the media, of what a terrible place it is to live. I hope you can see that some of the worst horror stories repeated about the CSSR are just that: stories to scare the children with (though they're sometimes fairly successful with adults too).

If all I've done is make you prepared to think twice each time you hear attacks on Czechoslovakia, or supposed facts about life in that country, before you swallow them whole, then I'll be more than satisfied. If you're still the unquestioning believer of every quotation in *italic* included so far, than all I can say, as Jan Hus said of the poor peasant who came to throw wood on his execution pyre: "O sancta simplicitas!" (That's "O holy simplicity", or, to put it in slightly more modern language, "You daft berk!")—I can afford to be rude, because anyone so daft would have given up reading well before now.)

I hope you can see that if, for instance, democracy in Czechoslovakia isn't the same as democracy in Britain, that doesn't mean it's worse: just different. You have to be prepared to examine it to decide whether it's good, bad or indifferent; you can't reject it simply on the grounds that it's not *the same*. But there are a number of other aspects of life in Czechoslovakia that aren't the same; and they're positive aspects of life in Czechoslovakia—though I hope I've already pointed to more than a few of those.

If the second part of this book is shorter than the first, it's not because there isn't much positive about Czechoslovakia. But I could, nevertheless, summarise what follows in no more than a few phrases on the positive features that I'm about to cover: In Czechoslovakia, there is no unemployment, women are truly equal with men, there are no cuts but only expansion in public spending and services, national minorities are treated with honour and respect as equals, and Ian MacGregor isn't in the CSSR. But there's more to it than that . . .

Czechoslovak employment office



I CAN OFFER YOU TWO
THE CHOICE OF 250 VACANCIES
IN THE PRAGUE 2 DISTRICT...

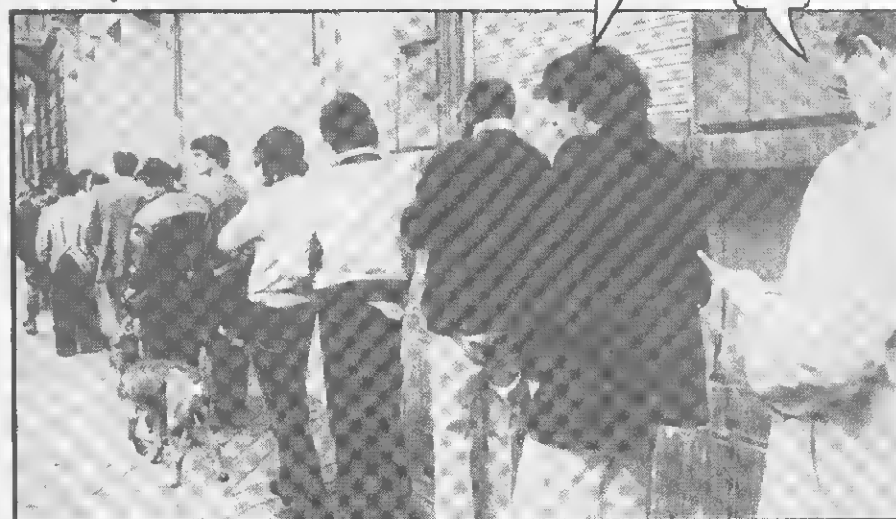
HOW MANY OF US
IN THIS QUEUE?

TWO HUNDRED
AND FIFTY

HOW MANY
VACANCIES?

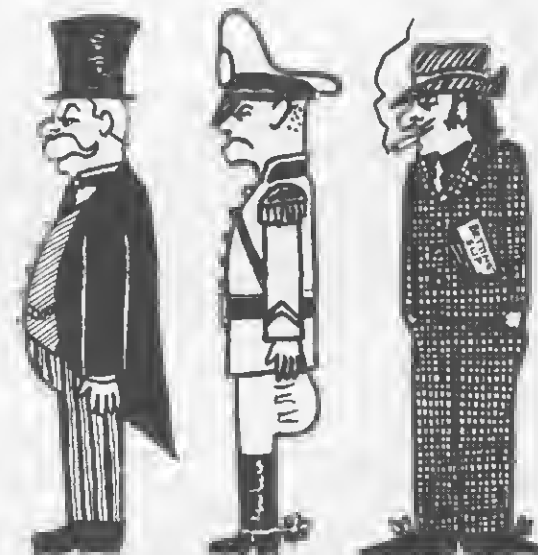
TWO

Job-seeking in Britain



CZECHOSLOVAKIA'S UNEMPLOYED

SORRY, NO VACANCIES
FOR CAPITALISTS, NAZIS,
BOOKIES, PROPERTY
SPECULATORS, LAND-
LORDS, etc., etc., etc...



D.

Chapter 6: Jobs for the boys- and the girls!

Those who read the *New State of the World Atlas* will find that it omits one of the most important facts about Czechoslovakia. Not surprisingly; according to Messrs Kidron and Segal, there is "no data available" on the subject; the subject in question being unemployment. Perhaps the two gentlemen should have watched Channel 4 News's "Comment" slot on 25 February, 1985, where the Czechoslovak Embassy's press attache Josef Konecny would have supplied the data for them: zero.

His statement that Czechoslovakia has "got rid of unemployment, poverty and enormous social differences left behind by pre-war society" may have come as news to them. Or it may have been too uncomfortable a fact. They manage to gloss over the USSR's similar lack of unemployment by labelling it on the same map as "0 per cent to 5 per cent unemployment". That's a neat way of concealing the accurate figure: again, zero. (It's less dishonest than their earlier edition, which had no map of unemployment figures whatsoever; instead it coupled Eastern and Western Europe in a single rising graph

of unemployment.)

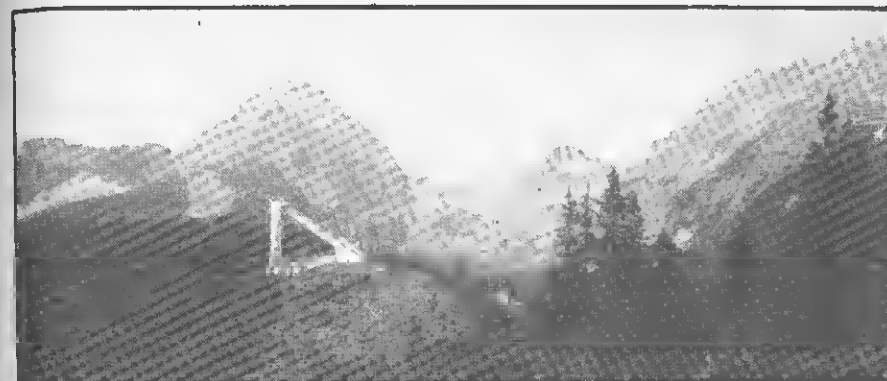
But even if Messrs Kidron and Segal did see Mr Konecny's broadcast, they could no doubt find an explanation for his claimed absence of unemployment in his homeland. They already provide one for the same phenomenon in the USSR: "Work is provided without corresponding production, in a form that crowds factory floors". What an indictment! Even if it's true—which it isn't—I can think of a few million people in Britain right now who would be quite prepared to put up with a bit of "crowding"—as long as it wasn't in dole offices.

Article 21(1) of the Constitution of the CSSR states that "All citizens shall have the right to work and to remuneration for work done according to its quantity, quality and social importance". That's a "human right" not included in the US Constitution, and certainly not in our own (unwritten) Constitution—indeed, in recent years, "the right to work" has become government-speak (and media-speak) for "the right to break strikes". But the reason there is no unemployment in Czechoslovakia is not simply the existence of a paragraph in the Constitution. Rather, it's because of the situation described by the next paragraph 21(2):

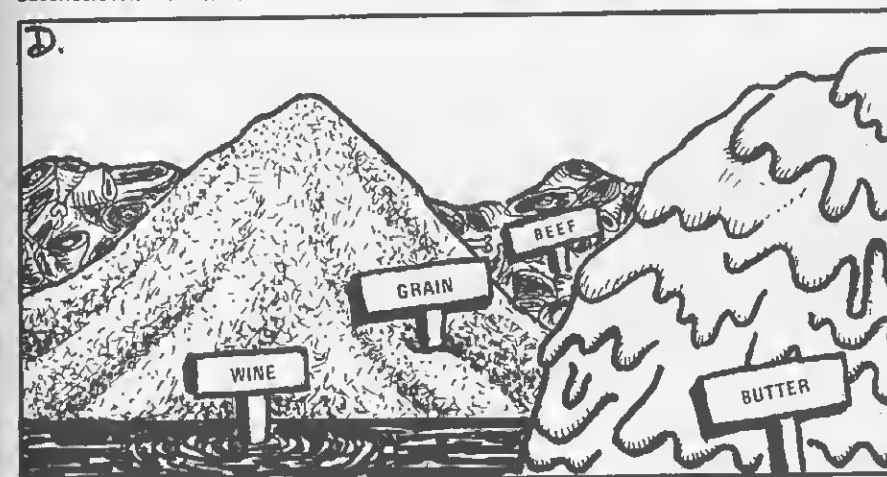
"The right to work and to remuneration for work done is secured by the entire socialist economic system, which does not experience economic crises or unemployment and guarantees a continuous rise in the real value of remuneration."

To try to explain the simple statement that the existence of a "socialist economic system" is the basis for the abolition of unemployment in a few words might be foolish. So, at the risk of appearing foolish, let me suggest that the system of private ownership makes one level or another of unemployment inevitable. As long as there is a parasitic ruling class that exists—very comfortably—without performing any socially useful labour, we must have a system of private profit. Therefore, the total paid to those actually working (when other costs are left aside) must be less than the total cost of the goods they produce when these are offered to them as consumers on the market. Thus, more is produced than can be sold.

There are many ways round this. The non-working rich can consume much themselves, particularly in the field of luxuries—and they certainly do. Surplus production can be exported; or it can be channelled into production which has no other object than the destruction of its products: war materiel. But since the world is no longer the open market it was for British production a century or more ago, and every capitalist nation is trying to produce a balance of payments surplus as against all others, and as no country can remain on a war economy forever, it is in the end inevitable that some of the goods produced cannot be sold. So you get EEC mountains, the closure



Czechoslovak mountains



EEC mountains—and lake!

of production, and unemployment until the market picks up again.

It's only a socialist economy, based on production for consumption rather than for the profit of a tiny minority class of the rich, that can effectively abolish unemployment. If my thumbnail sketch of the inevitability of unemployment under present-day capitalism fails to impress, simply look around: unemployment is now growing rapidly in even the (formerly) most "miraculous" of capitalist economies; it does not exist in such socialist economies as Czechoslovakia and the USSR.

This didn't stop French director Jean-Luc Godard (in his Maoist phase) from describing Czechoslovakia as capitalist in his 1969 film "Pravda". A shot of some secretaries at work was accompanied (twice) by the comment that "this proves there are executives because these are executive secretaries". An advert for Czechoslovak Airlines, or "OK Jet" as its planes are labelled, was shown as proof of "westernism in

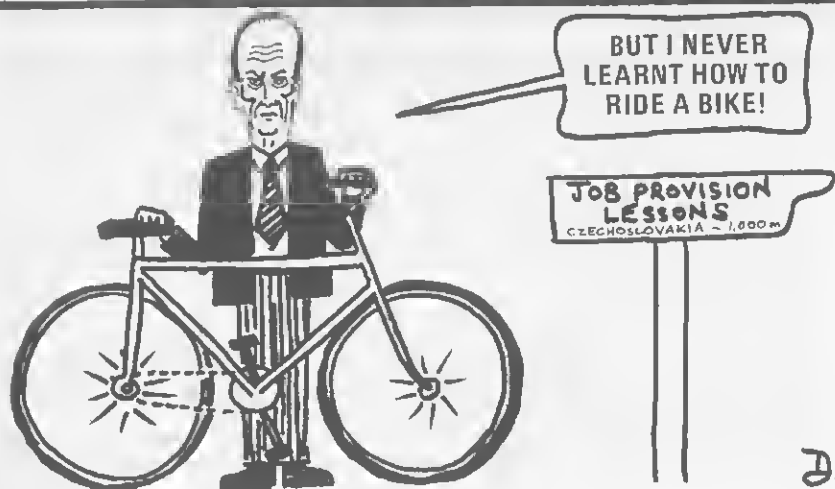
practice". Some proof! M Godard's film somehow neglected to mention the basic fact of Czechoslovakia's full employment.

Not that I'd suggest that there are no problems with employment in Czechoslovakia; there certainly are. But they're not the sort of problem that occurred in Britain while I was in the CSSR in October 1984, when a record figure of 3,283,640 registered unemployed was announced—a problem that by the time you read this is more likely to have got bigger than gone away. There are two main problems with employment in Czechoslovakia, and the first of the precise opposite of our own: lack of workers.

It's practically impossible in Czechoslovakia to find a factory without a "Wanted" notice outside—and I'm not talking about police notices, I'm talking about job vacancies. Nowhere is this more evident than in the construction industry. Though there are building sites everywhere, with new blocks of flats in particular going up all over the place, there is a chronic shortage of building workers.

I heard the term "lack of construction capacity" used a number of times when new developments were discussed before realising its actual significance. Basically it means not enough bricklayers. In Britain, at least half a million building workers are unemployed, not to mention the millions of bricks stockpiled while hundreds of thousands remain homeless. In Czechoslovakia's socialist economy, where everyone is guaranteed a job, it's not so easy to attract people to occupations as arduous as construction work or, say, coalmining.

Thus, as I was told by Miroslav Kotel and Miroslav Teichman of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, it's often necessary to offer preferential conditions, special bonuses and other perks in order to attract workers into a particular industry or project or a particular part of the country. Nobody is told to "get on their bike" to find a job; but



if workers are particularly needed in a certain area, the Government will (metaphorically, or, indeed, literally) pay for the bike. I was told of bonuses of many thousands of crowns being paid to people prepared to relocate in order to work on a particular construction project, together with the preferential provision of accommodation. A number of plants and workplaces also own their own flats; if there is a shortage of workers with a particular skill, any recruits from elsewhere in the country can expect to go to the top of the enterprise's housing list.

In the construction industry, housing, power stations and factories are the main priorities, another industry given priority is electronics and computer technology, in which Czechoslovakia makes no bones about being years behind some western countries—hence the high prices for calculators. So, as in Britain (so far at least), anyone with qualifications in this field is guaranteed a job commensurate with their knowledge and abilities. But when we're talking about people with higher education, we come up against the second problem of employment in Czechoslovakia; and again, it's in some ways the opposite to Britain.

In the CSSR it's no problem to get a job if you're a skilled, semi-skilled or even totally unskilled worker. Nor is it any problem becoming a skilled worker. Before you leave school, you don't simply get a pep-talk (with no real hope) from a careers teacher; you get several visits from local factories, practically begging you to come and work for them and learn a trade. Local councils run an employment service—though not an unemployment service. Finding a job is easy—and more often than not, the jobs are trying to find you.

But, as Messrs Kotel and Teichman told me, those with university educations are expected to find their own jobs. And whereas those going straight into work from school usually stay in their home town, graduates generally want to stay in the city where they earned their degrees—most often in Prague or the Slovak capital of Bratislava. This doesn't pose a problem for those who've graduated in such subjects as engineering or electronics: wherever they choose to settle there's bound to be a job for them. But for those with qualifications in, for instance, medicine, this can be a problem; there is far less call for extra doctors in Prague than in other parts of the CSSR. Thus smaller towns often offer preferential treatment to doctors similar to that offered to building workers.

Not, mind you, that an electronics or engineering degree is a guaranteed leg-up on the ladder of promotion to higher management; experience and just plain hard work count as well, and people with only a secondary education are often to be found in higher positions in industry than their graduate colleagues. But more such graduates are nevertheless required.

In the current five-year-plan, steps are planned for the opening of new faculties in various regions of the CSSR to cope with local shortages of specialists and to overcome the notorious reluctance of

graduates to shift from their place of study after qualification. At the same time, it's planned to make adjustments in the ratio of degree courses in favour of those specialisations needed for the development of the economy; if that sounds a bit like our own government talking, it's necessary to remember in which direction our economy is "developing"; in Czechoslovakia any such adjustment will be for the benefit of all society.

But if, at one end of the scale, graduates can't always be sure of getting precisely the job they want precisely where they want it, at the other end, the situation's more than a little different than our own Youth Training Scheme. Czechoslovakia has its own youth training scheme: it's called apprenticeships (a word people in Britain may remember from the distant past). This can take the form of direct entry into a factory as a worker, or study in a secondary technical school after basic education, particular schools often being linked to groups of factories or single large enterprises. The difference between this and similar schemes on our own YTS (apart from length of duration and quality of training) is the absolute guarantee of a job on qualification.

Another difference with our own Youth Training Scheme is the special attention paid to the health and safety of young workers in Czechoslovakia. Workers under the age of 18 are not permitted to work nights, are often limited to working a six-hour day and receive longer holidays than their adult counterparts, as well as many other benefits and precautions. The record of YTS in Britain hardly stands comparison. A report by the charitable organisation Youthaid in October 1984 showed that young people on YTS and its predecessor, the misnamed "Youth Opportunities Programme", had a measurably higher level of accidents at work than adult workers. In the five years after the inception of YOP in 1978, there had been 27 deaths and 11,000 injuries at work to participants in the schemes, and the level, according to Youthaid, was rising.

Any such level of injury to young workers would cause an uproar in Czechoslovakia; as would any discrimination in jobs for young people because of their national origin, whether Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, Ukrainian, German or Russian. Of course, such discrimination is illegal in Britain; but it just so happens that, according to a report by the Commission of Racial Equality in September 1984 (when I was in Czechoslovakia finding out about a *real* absence of discrimination), only one in twenty of 1983's black school-leavers in the West Midlands had found jobs.

Young workers in Czechoslovakia are often—as at the Slovnaft oil refinery and chemical works that I visited in Bratislava—put under the wing of an older "adviser" for the first year or two of their working lives, to help accustom and acclimatise them to the workplace and the different working practices involved, and thus to find the best area for them to work. But if young people find it easy to adapt, particularly in



*TRANSLATION: "I am an apprentice"***

**Younger readers may need to look this word up in a dictionary or an encyclopedia

the rapidly changing world of modern industry, it's not so easy for older workers. Nowhere in Czechoslovakia will you come across the phenomenon of workers thrown on the scrap heap at fifty or even forty with no prospect of another job. But you will find them sometimes being left behind in the promotion and technology stakes by younger workers; at the same time you'll find many being retrained for new processes and techniques. And you'll also find older workers staying on at work after retirement age. This is possible for many manual workers, though less common with white collar workers. Those staying on are normally entitled to collect both their wage and their pension.

Are there no redundancies? Yes, there are, but of factories, not workers. Sometimes a section in a factory, or an entire factory, may be faced with closure, because technology has moved on or because there has been a fall in the demand for its products. Workers in a closed department of a factory have to be found jobs in other parts of the same factory; if this is impossible, or the entire factory is closing, then, in co-operation with the local council, new jobs nearby must be found for the "redundant" workers at the same or higher wages, with retraining if necessary. Until this is done, they continue to be employed at full pay; no-one can be laid off without pay in Czechoslovakia as a result of "rationalisation" or factory closure.

But closures are in any case the exception. Far more common is the development prescribed for 1985 under the current five year plan: 92 entire new factories were scheduled for opening, together with twenty non-manufacturing enterprises. The main problem will be where to find the workers to fill them all. The number of workers in paid employment in Czechoslovakia is about 7.5 million, as against 5.5 million 35 years earlier; there cannot be expected to be any large increase in the near future. Until computerisation and automation—of the sort that workers in Britain understandably fear—begin to be really felt, there will be the continuing problem for Czechoslovakia of "lack

of labour". We should have such problems!

One particular problem that we have with jobs in Britain can be expressed in two words: Ian MacGregor. Having cut the number of jobs in British Steel by a third, he moved on to try the same again on the National Coal Board, with the active backing and encouragement of the government (not to say on its instructions). Yet in August 1985 the amount of bounty paid to his previous employers, Lazard Freres, for his period of tenure at British Steel, both for making him available and for his "efficiency" was announced as an amazing £3m—of which, as a senior partner in the firm, he'll get a fair slice himself.

This bonus wasn't paid for increasing production; that went down. It wasn't for creating jobs; he cut 50,000 of them. It was for making the scaled-down steel industry "more efficient"—though at the time of the £3m announcement British Steel had just recorded a loss. (MacGregor was forgiven for this; it wasn't *his* fault. It was caused not by internal problems but by the miners' strike—provoked by one Ian MacGregor.)

Under MacGregor, not even profitable steelworks were exempted from the axe, the most notorious instance being the closure of Consett—"In the black, got the sack", as their banners proclaimed at the time. The closures continue. Though a temporary reprieve was declared for Ravenscraig and Llanwern (both already massively cut back), the closure of the Gartcosh rolling mill (800 jobs) was announced practically simultaneously with MacGregor's millions. The problem, you see, is that there just isn't the demand for steel any more.

Well, not under capitalism, there isn't. In Czechoslovakia, it's a different picture. I saw notices near the giant Poldi-SONP steelworks near Kladno, proudly announcing that their production of steel was 71m crowns-worth over target. Unlike Consett, it won't be closing; they are also advertising vacancies. No steelworker will ever get the MacGregor treatment in Czechoslovakia.



Steelmaking at Kladno, where production is increasing, there is no danger of the plant's closure and no fear of redundancies among the workforce



Steelmaking at Consett? This hole in the ground is all that remains of the giant Consett steelworks, closed under Ian MacGregor despite being in profit

Chapter 7: Not the second sex

The absence of a guaranteed right to work in Britain, either on paper or in reality, helps to make a nonsense of those two other welcome steps forward in the 1970s: our laws against sex discrimination and on equal pay. Whatever our official unemployment figure when you read this, it's a safe bet that you can add a six-figure sum (or even seven-figure) to represent the number of married women who would be only too happy to be holding down jobs, but don't register as officially unemployed for two reasons: one, it's a waste of effort; two, they don't qualify for unemployment benefit.

But if the chances of full-time employment for women in Britain have decreased since the Second World War, and most especially in recent years, the opposite is true of Czechoslovakia. In the thirty-five years from 1948, the number of women in employment there increased by 1.4 million—an increase of over 60 per cent. They had equal pay and equal rights to a job nearly three decades before we in Britain did; but that statistic shows that those "rights" were not negated by the absence

of jobs.

Or does it? A mere statistic showing more women actually with jobs doesn't necessarily show that they are playing an equal role in the economy with men; or that their work is of equal value; after all, the figure could simply be the result of an increase in the population and is no indication that the jobs taken by women now are either better paid or more socially-valued than previously.

In fact, however, the increase in the number of women in work is not merely numerical, it is proportional. In 1948, women represented just over 37 per cent of the employed workforce in Czechoslovakia; they now represent some 46 per cent. Allowing for the number of women involved in child-bearing and the early stages of child-rearing at any one time, that's about as equal as any society's ever likely to get (unless, heaven forbid, we ever get around to a "Brave New World" situation of test-tube babies from fertilisation to birth in all cases!)

And in the same period, women have been steadily moving into jobs and professions previously largely or exclusively male. For instance, in 1948, just over a quarter of doctors in Czechoslovakia were women; it's now over half. (The fact that in the same period the numerical increase in the number of women doctors was almost five-fold demonstrates that the proportional increase was not at the expense of male doctors but part of the process of expansion of the health service). A third of university lecturers in the CSSR today are women; and the increases are not only in such academically-qualified work. High proportions of women now work as, for instance, skilled engineers and printers, at one time exclusively male occupations.

There are two fields, however, in which there has been no such increase. The first is heavy work such as mining. Women are barred

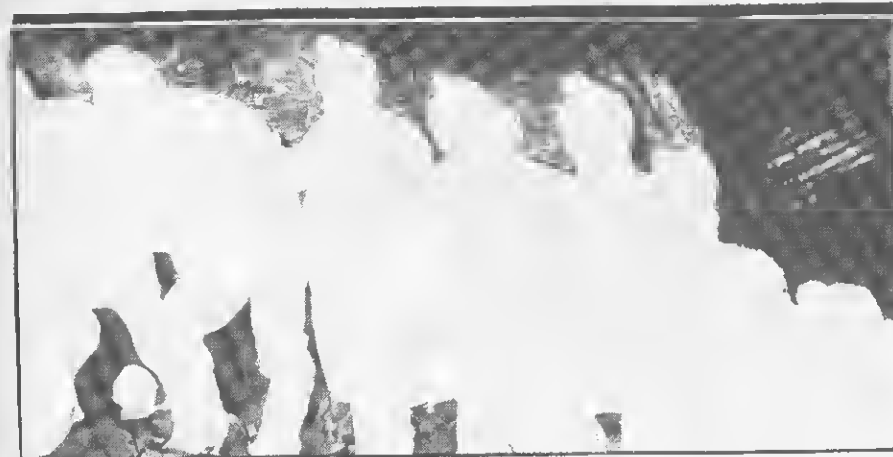


WOMEN in mines in Czechoslovakia —there are none. (For that matter there are none in mines in Britain either)

from working in pits and a few other areas of particularly heavy work. Many people in Britain would debate this question, and argue that if a woman is strong enough to do the work, she should be allowed to. However, similar restrictions occur in Britain; and the Czechoslovaks point to the particular effects of women's reproductive cycle as a justification for the limitation. Also as in Britain, there are limitations on night-work for women; this is totally illegal in Czechoslovakia under the age of eighteen and requires special permission above that age. In Britain there are plans to scrap the protective legislation for women on this issue; but here, as in Czechoslovakia, the way to achieve equality is surely by the reduction and elimination as far as possible of night work for *both* sexes rather than its extension to women.

The number of women employed in Czechoslovakia has actually gone down in another field—and that "field" can be taken quite literally: it's in agriculture. Yet this decrease in employment can actually be seen as an improvement in the situation and status of women. In 1948, no less than 56.7 per cent of all employed women were working in agriculture, which was then one of the poorest sectors of employment. Now, only 12 per cent of working women are in agriculture—the number of men has decreased, of course, though not as drastically; the overall number of people working in agriculture has been halved. The minority of working women now involved in farming are part of a far more efficient, mechanised agricultural system, far removed from the backbreaking toil of their mothers and grandmothers.

Don't get the impression that any of this implies a reduction of women to mere labour units or economic statistics. Nor should you fall for the old stereotype of women under socialism in which they are



MEN in Cortonwood colliery, Yorkshire—there are none. It was one of dozens of mines closed by Ian MacGregor

usually portrayed as street-sweepers (there certainly are women street-cleaners in Czechoslovakia—I've seen them—though why this should be considered such a condemnation of socialism I've never been able to figure out). Equally false is the picture presented by writers such as A H Hermann:

"Of far greater consequence, however (in the early 1960s) was the fact that no man could support a family alone. His wife also had to work."

("A History of the Czechs", Allen Lane/Penguin, 1975, page 279)

This will appear as a horror story only to those who absurdly believe that women go out to work for "pin money". How many families in Britain could live comfortably on the income of a sole breadwinner who was neither a member of management or some highly-paid elite nor the performer of unlimited overtime? How many women in Britain are "housewives" not by choice or because of children but by the simple fact of mass unemployment? Women have always worked outside the home, and always will. The man who says "I wouldn't dream of letting my wife go out to work" is either a sexist, a fool, or very wealthy—or all three.

But if 46 per cent of women of working age and not in full-time education are employed, does this mean that housework simply becomes an additional burden, that they work a "second shift"? I asked Dr Vackova of the Czechoslovak Union of Women about the attitude of men to sharing the burden of housework and child-rearing (the latter is, of course, a pleasure as well as a burden). She told me that as in so many countries, with the modern generation this was increasingly a question of partnership in which it was accepted as necessary that the work should be shared.

There is, of course, some way to go before anything like absolute equality is attained in the sphere of domestic work. Surveys carried out in the early 1980s showed that men continue to have more free time than women in Czechoslovakia. After employment, travelling, cleaning, shopping, maintenance, gardening, childcare, personal hygiene, and other activities and of course sleep are removed from the week, the remaining leisure time for men is about 30½ hours on average and for women about 21½ hours. Clearly a fairer share of domestic chores on the part of the men could even this out.

That may not be an ideal situation, but its imperfection is recognised. Addressing the Congress of the Czechoslovak Union of Women in June 1984 on behalf of the Communist Party and the government, Federal Assembly chairman Alois Indra said:

"We are, however, deeply aware that in our endeavour to bring about the complete equality of women we must not stop, we must not rest satisfied with the achieved state." He went on to speak of social

measures designed to enable women to play a yet more active part in society.

Perhaps a swift kick in a few male behinds might be in order too; no doubt in many cases they're already getting it. As Dr Vackova pointed out to me, it is common nowadays for women in Czechoslovakia to have higher qualifications than their husbands: "Later school leavers and graduates often marry men with only a basic education." This isn't surprising; of those staying on for secondary education (that is, after the basic nine-year schooling) in general and specialised secondary schools the proportion of women is over 60 per cent; and it is only in apprentice schools that this proportion is reversed. And of university students, a remarkable 43 per cent are women. In Britain, not even in the Open University, with the highest proportion by far of women, does the percentage of women students even reach 40 per cent.



Science and technology students in Czechoslovakia. (Boys and men are also permitted to study such subjects)

I don't want to seem too hard on Czechoslovak men; if the figures for spare time after employment and housework are hardly equal, they're better than the average for couples in similar circumstances in Britain. I couldn't help noticing, for instance, the high proportion of men pushing prams when I've been in Czechoslovakia—a small point, and not one exclusive to that country, but not totally without significance. The main point, though, about women's employment and the family unit is that the situation in the CSSR means that very few women can be considered "economically dependent" on their husbands.

How is it possible for such a high proportion of women to have "economic independence" in the form of a career, or at least a steady job? It is seen as not only economically useful, but necessary in principle and in the interests of all society. Czechoslovakia's first working-class president, Klement Gottwald, put it like this:

"One of the major tasks facing a democratic regime is to achieve women's equality. Not just formal equality on paper, but in real life. Women make up half the population. Without their participation we could hardly develop to the full the creative forces of our nation and we could never build our state the way we want to build it."

For this reason measures are taken in Czechoslovak society that, while they may cause some temporary inconvenience to others, act to the benefit of women and as such to the long-term benefit of society as a whole. Thus, any woman leaving employment as a result of pregnancy is guaranteed her old job back at any time until the child's third birthday. This can cause problems. When I visited the Orbis Press Agency in Prague, for instance, someone mentioned to me that a young female member of staff was about to get married. This was expected (as these things will) to lead to pregnancy and the loss of a member of the staff, at least temporarily, and for the first 26 weeks' absence, a woman receives maternity pay (90 per cent of normal earnings) or, in the case of a single mother, for 35 weeks. But at any time within three years of the birth she could demand her old job back, or an equivalent job. "It can be difficult for us," I was told by a (male) member of the staff, "but it's a principle that we must stick to."

In Britain, of course, you can never tell whether there will be any jobs left in three years' time, never mind the one you vacated; but it's a very different story in the labour-shortage economy of socialist Czechoslovakia. In fact, any woman would be able to find a new job without difficulty at another workplace at any time; but why should women be obliged to give up a specific job at a workplace of their choosing as a result of carrying out the vital and socially necessary task of childbirth? (Not that either I or the people of Czechoslovakia consider the "production" of children some sort of Orwellian "duty to

the state".)

But how is it possible for a woman to return to paid employment even when their children are three years old? Who's going to look after them? It's difficult to understand, living as we do in a country where local authorities provide little more than 25,000 day nursery places. Yet in Czechoslovakia, a country with little more than a quarter of the population of our own, there are twenty times as many nursery places for children of three, four and five years old. In the years 1981 and 1982 alone, 580 new nursery schools were opened in the CSSR with a total capacity of over 35,000 places—more than in all publicly-run nurseries in Britain—and 96 per cent of all children between three and five now attend nursery school.

There are also over 2,000 creches in the CSSR caring for nearly 90,000 children under the age of three, run by the national health service. At the end of the Second World War, there were hardly as many places in creches as there are now creches, an increase of forty times over. In Britain, the development has been in the opposite direction; few people remember the extensive nursery service during the War but effectively dismantled since. It seems it's only when there's a war to win that women get jobs and the facilities to enable them to take them—the "war" against women's inequality doesn't count.



ARE THESE
MEALS FREE?

NO, THEY COME OUT OF THE
EXTORTIONATE NURSERY
FEES OF £2.25 A WEEK THAT
OUR PARENTS PAY FOR US!

1/100,000th of the nursery school children in Czechoslovakia

As if the level of provision I've already indicated weren't enough, many factories, co-operatives and other workplaces set up their own creches as a means of attracting workers where they are understaffed—and that's a lot of workplaces in Czechoslovakia. Of course, we in Britain have some workplace nurseries, though they number less than a couple of hundred, and several in universities—although these are usually only for students' children; those of staff (particularly ancillary staff) rarely get a look in.

There are in Britain, of course, hundreds of thousands of places in fee-paying private nurseries, and some local authorities will place some employees' children in these or the few co-operative nurseries such as the Kingsway centre in London. However, the Government made it clear in July 1985 that it intends to tax employees for the employers' contribution to the costs (usually a half or sometimes two-thirds) of such places. This increase in the cost will put this service out of the reach of those women who most need it. Even before any additional burden placed by the government, we're already talking in terms of up to and over £150 per month. (All that parents pay in Czechoslovakia is the cost of the meals: 5½ crowns per day in nurseries, 8 crowns a day in creches. At the official rate of exchange at the time when I visited a Prague nursery in 1984 that was about 42p and 64p per day.)

Even when children are at school, many mothers in Britain will know that school hours make continuing with a career very difficult for several years. In Czechoslovakia this problem is lessened by the provision of after-school centres, where children are looked after until their parents get back from work. There are over 400,000 children catered for in such centres. A further benefit to mothers (and their children) is the fact that each summer 150,000 children go off to well-sponsored young pioneer camps.

At the further end of family life, when retirement comes around



Motherhood is still considered very important...

(normally at 57 for women as opposed to 60 for men) you might expect a problem for women, as the amount of pension is based on the number of years worked. However, time spent raising children is for this purpose considered as "work" (and it certainly is!), so that women's pensions aren't impaired; not only that, but women who have raised children can retire earlier. If you've had one child, you're entitled to your pension at 56; at 55 if you've had two; at 54 for three or four; and at 53 for more than four (you'd also deserve a medal, and, for all I know, in Czechoslovakia you may well get one!)

Not all women want to be mothers, in Czechoslovakia as anywhere else. Reliable contraception is available, though not used as widely as it might be: only about one in ten women between 15 and 44 being on the pill and about 15 per cent fitted with IUDs. Condoms are used, though diaphragms hardly ever, and the notoriously ineffective coitus interruptus is still widely practised, according to surveys. It's not surprising, therefore, that unwanted pregnancies occur.

Prior to the introduction of liberalised laws in 1957, there were strict limitations on abortion; this changed with the introduction of laws rather similar to those introduced in Britain a decade later. In the last decade, the "other reasons" added to the medical justifications for abortion in the legislation have been interpreted so broadly as to effectively equal the "abortion on demand" policy of the USSR, Poland, the German Democratic Republic and other countries—though there is certainly a case for giving legislative backing to a woman's right to choose.

As it is, in Czechoslovakia, a woman requiring an abortion has to go before a three-member commission appointed by the local council, usually comprising a councillor, a doctor and another "expert", normally a sociologist or psychologist; no doubt one of the considerations in their mind is the fact that it is in the interests of the



...but so, and increasingly so, is the role of the father

state to increase the population in Czechoslovakia. If that sounds daunting, the figures show that it isn't: 96 per cent of requests for abortion are granted. And 99 per cent of abortions in Czechoslovakia take place within the first three months of pregnancy, and the vast majority of these are carried out by vacuum aspiration, the method that is easiest, most comfortable and least gruelling, traumatic or dangerous.

So if motherhood is considered a virtue in Czechoslovakia—and it undeniably is—it's clearly not the be-all and end-all of womanhood. On that point, it's interesting to note that, in an International Women's Day speech to women in 1985, President Gustav Husak praised women's contribution to society as workers in all fields and for the "active participation of women in political and public life" long before he got around to discussing their role as mothers (the same was true of his speech on a similar occasion a year earlier).

I've already briefly mentioned the role of women in Czechoslovakia as workers, and the provisions that make it possible for them to play that role to the full; what, then, of their role in "political and public life"? I mentioned in Chapter 4 that the union committee at the ROH School was predominantly made up of women, and as far as I'm concerned, trade union activity is a vital part of political and public life. In fact, as Marie Glascrova told me at the ROH School, the proportion of women on the union committee there was roughly the same as the proportion of women union members. She also told me that in branches of industry, such as textiles or social welfare, where women are in the majority (as indeed in Britain), women predominate in the leaderships of the unions (as *not*, despite some improvements in recent years, in Britain). Indeed, though women in the CSSR account for about 42 per cent of trade union membership, the proportion of the half-million-odd elected union officers who are women is approaching 50 per cent.

Of course, most women spend much of their lives having and raising children, which is bound to act as a brake on advancement both in career and union involvement, but "an effort is made to involve women at all levels". It's interesting to note, for instance, that the editor of what I consider one of the most interesting and well-produced magazines to come out of Czechoslovakia in translation into English, *Czechoslovak Trade Unions*, produced by the Central Trade Union Council of the ROH, is edited by a woman, Hana Seminova.

The aspirations of women in Czechoslovak society also find part of their fulfilment through the Czechoslovak Union of Women, which has a membership of one million—and which was referred to as the "Women's Lib Movement", at least in translation, to me in Czechoslovakia. (Although, as Freda Wilson of Britain's National Assembly of Women commented when at the Women's Union Congress in June 1984, its policies were "very similar to our policies and aims, but we are still campaigning for things which have already been

implemented in Czechoslovakia.")

A number of laws in the CSSR have been adopted as a result of drafts put forward by the Union of Women, and no legislation concerning women could ever be put forward without the Union being consulted. Nor is the Union some sort of "front" for the Communist Party; eleven out of twelve of its members are not members of any political party—and, as with so many other bodies in Czechoslovakia, the representation of youth is growing: two-fifths of the Union's members are young women under 35.

The reason that the Czechoslovak Union of Women has the ear of the government isn't far to seek: in the current Federal Assembly (1981-1986), 28.6 per cent of the deputies (MPs) are women. That's far from perfect, but it makes our Parliament look pretty sick, for all that we've got a woman prime minister (who has done even more against the interests of working class—and other—women than many of her male predecessors).

When we look at a lower—or, more correctly, more local—level of government, the picture is still better. Of councillors elected to regional, town, district and village councils in the term current as I write, over 60,709 are women. Out of a total of 196,469 elected representatives, that's nearly 31 per cent.

It's true that 31 per cent doesn't equal 50 per cent; the closer it gets to it the more I like it—but we've got a long way to go before we get anywhere near the Czechoslovak level. And that anonymous "28.6 per cent" of women members in the Federal Assembly actually means precisely 100 very real women out of 350 deputies. When our Parliament (with nearly twice as many members) has anywhere near as many women MPs in it, I'll believe we're getting somewhere on the road to women's liberation—with or (preferably) without Margaret Thatcher.

Article 27 of the Constitution of the CSSR states:

"The equal status of women in the family, at work and in public life shall be secured by special adjustment of working conditions and special health care during pregnancy and maternity, as well as by the development of facilities and services which will enable women fully to participate in the life of society."

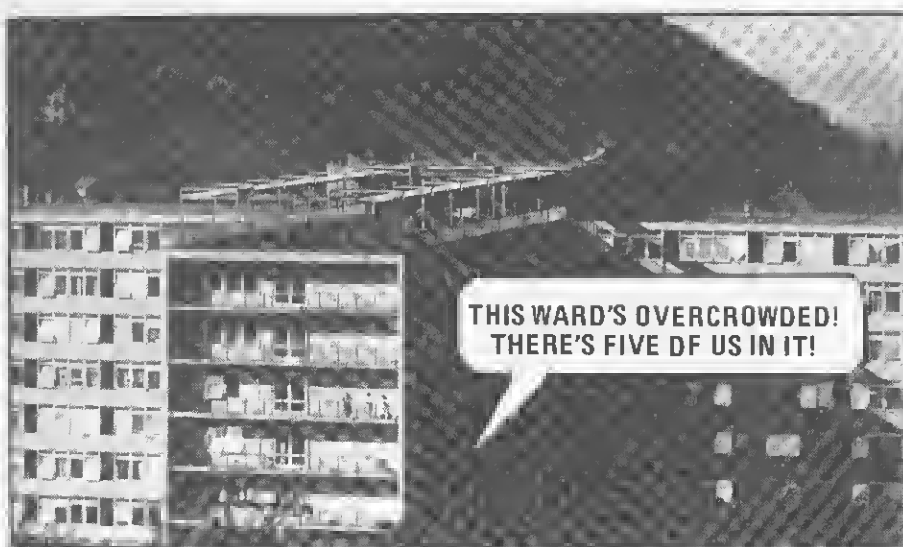
I think that's meant to be taken as a statement of aim rather than of existing reality, as is the Family Law that states that husband and wife have equal rights and equal responsibilities. Nevertheless, it's an aim that grows daily nearer in Czechoslovakia, while remaining for us essentially something of the future we'll doubtless see but can't quite just yet.



Chapter 8: No caps, no cuts

I mentioned in an earlier chapter that the CSSR's equivalent of the GLC and the metropolitan counties were under no threat of abolition. Nor are they under any threat of having their government-provided funding reduced because they've been charging what the government considers too high a rate in order to maintain levels of provision to the public. This won't happen for two reasons: one is that the level of provision of services rises continuously; the other is that Czechoslovak citizens don't pay rates and so can't be overcharged (nor their councils rate-capped).

Prague 4 Council, for instance, in 1984 had a budget of 700m crowns; eighty per cent of this was received from central government. The 20 per cent raised locally came from the profits of locally-based industry, payments for land for housebuilding, the issuing of dog licences (at a much more sensible level of nearer £50 than our 37p) and from other similar sources. Councils don't always get all they ask for, of course; council leader Zdenek Dedic told me of his council's wish to build a



The new hospital in Most, North Bohemia

new 1,900-bed hospital during the current five-year plan; however it might be that Prague 5's council could make a better case to the State Planning Commission for a hospital in their area, and they could get the cash instead. What won't happen is that any hospitals or clinics in either district of the capital will be closed down, unless it's to replace them with more modern facilities.

The problem with the provision of such new health facilities isn't the money; it's the labour. The 1,400-bed hospital that I visited in Most in North Bohemia was planning to build a new geriatric wing. Planning permission had been granted by the council and all the necessary cash guaranteed. They were just having trouble locating the necessary "construction capacity"—which translates into better English as "enough building workers who aren't already building something else."

Say, for instance, the leader of Prague District 4's council suggested to me, that some people in an outlying area want a new water pipeline installed—but we haven't got the building workers to spare to do it at the time. If the people themselves are prepared to volunteer to put in the work, we provide them with all the cash and the equipment they need.

You won't see in Czechoslovakia the sort of cutbacks in staff and funding in much council-run operations as libraries. The library in which I worked in 1967 and 1968 no longer has its impressive range of daily papers and weekly magazines; it no longer opens on Thursdays—to be able to accommodate the days off of the reduced staff of librarians; the previously separate jobs of cleaner and porter have been amalgamated. This has been happening in libraries all over Britain; it

doesn't happen in Czechoslovakia, where the number and quality of public libraries (about 2,500) continues to rise—and there are also more than 1,500 university and college libraries, and tens of thousands of others in clubs, workplaces and so on.

I couldn't have been more impressed than I was by the library that I visited in the small town of Dobris (population: 6,500) south of Prague, in the company of local mayor Cyril Svoboda and the head librarian. Its provision of books, periodicals, meeting rooms and its general standard were well above what you could expect in a library in a similar town in Britain. But then there's hardly a village in Czechoslovakia too small not to have some kind of library facilities; and the local councils won't be closing any of them down.

Another thing that won't be happening in Czechoslovakia is that public transport will be being privatised, cut back, removed from democratic control or having its fares increased. The removal of London Transport from the control of the GLC was not only the first step in the removal of the capital's elected authority, it was also the first step in the drastic reduction, and possible eventual selling-off, of London's entire public transport network. The first privatised London bus route, formerly 81, went into operation in July 1985; the *London Standard* had earlier reported plans to put a further forty routes out to tender. In August 1985 three London bus routes were closed down; in the year to that date one third of all bus routes in the capital had either been reduced in length or frequency or scrapped altogether, despite the fact that bus use had gone up 14 per cent in three years. The same picture is repeated around the country, except where some (Labour) local authorities have fought particularly hard for a good service.

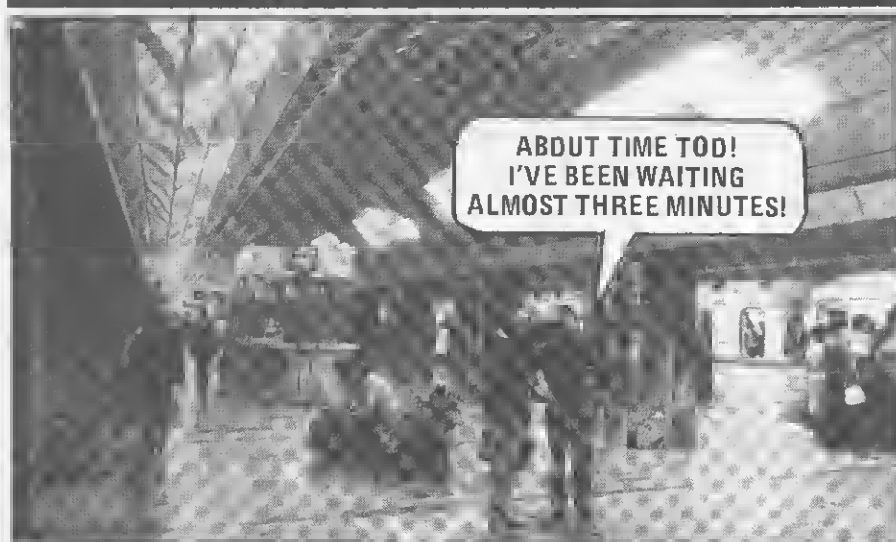
None of this could happen in Czechoslovakia; nor, if it was decided to reduce fares on public transport, could anyone challenge it in the courts and get higher fares imposed against the opposition of the people's elected representatives. Mind you, it's not likely that fares on public transport will be reduced—short of eventual abolition. At a mere crown on all city and town transport—underground, bus, tram or trolleybus—it's difficult to see the point of any reduction.

Already, pensioners travel free on public transport, as is the case in London and a number of other local authority areas in Britain; however, in a mean gesture, London Regional Transport in September 1984 put the time after which pensioners' free travel passes are valid back from 9am to 9.30am. In Czechoslovakia, children up to ten years old, non-commissioned members of the armed forces on duty, the disabled and the over-seventies all travel free of charge. Even for those who have to pay, what do you get for your crown coin? The most notable service is Prague's underground, the Metro. Begun in 1967, with Soviet assistance throughout, the Metro has three lines with 32 stations—a ratio of stations to population roughly the same as London's Tube. Passengers can travel from any one of these stations to any other for

just one crown. Further construction of the Metro is going on.

Nor is cheapness the only advantage of Prague's Metro; regularity and speed come into it too. At the end of every station there's a digital clock that begins ticking off as soon as the train leaves the station, only stopping when the next one arrives. It'd be a brave stationmaster on the London Underground who'd sit under such a clock; sometimes you can wait so long you might think it would need to display hours as well as seconds and minutes. In Prague, though, you'll very rarely see it reach two minutes. In dozens of journeys, one of the few times I've seen it do so was on a Sunday—nearly six minutes between trains. Anyone who's ever suffered from "engineering works on the Northern Line", or just plain London Regional Transport timetabling, won't be particularly horrified by that. (It's also interesting to see that on Sundays the Prague Metro is *full*, whereas in London the few people you'll see on the tube are mainly tourists. It was only briefly, in the pre-Lord Denning, Ken Livingstone era, that our capital's inhabitants could afford to use the Underground for anything other than such necessities as travel to work.)

So missing one train isn't much to worry about (I've never seen anyone running for a train, or up or down escalators—or even walking on them—on the Metro). But once you're on the train, you'll get where you're going quickly enough. The entire trip from Sokolovska to Kosmonautu on the 12-kilometre Line C takes only 25 minutes, including stops at all stations in between. Incidentally, at each of those stations, the train, rather like the Maestro, will talk to you; it tells you where you are and what the next stop will be. The only disadvantage for non-Slavic foreigners is that Czech words so often sound very



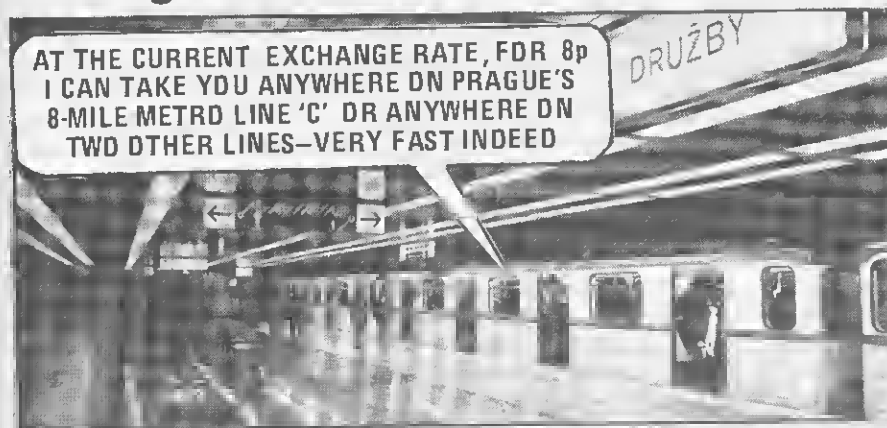
Talking Maestro

AT THE CURRENT PRICE OF PETROL FOR 8p I CAN TAKE YOU TWO MILES AT CRUISING SPEED—BUT A MUCH SHORTER DISTANCE IN TOWN TRAFFIC



Talking Metro

AT THE CURRENT EXCHANGE RATE, FOR 8p I CAN TAKE YOU ANYWHERE ON PRAGUE'S 8-MILE METRO LINE 'C' OR ANYWHERE ON TWO OTHER LINES—VERY FAST INDEED



different from what we'd expect them to from looking at them.

Also at the stations, you'll notice a great difference from all but the most central stations (and even some of them) on London's underground: they're clean, well-kept, well-lit and well designed. To a Dr Who fan, some of these structures of steel, bronze and marble may look uncomfortably like the flattened-out shell of a Dalek; but they're certainly worth looking at, and look as if they'll stay that way for many years to come.

There are no plans for other Metros in Czechoslovakia; but all other large towns have bus and tram or trolleybus networks just as extensive

as the federal capital's, at the same cost of one crown for any distance, and like them (though not the Metro) running all night, though on reduced services. And travelling late at night on country roads around Czechoslovakia, I've been surprised at the number of country buses and coaches running on what seemed to me fairly insignificant thoroughfares.

The same applies to rail transport. The level crossing sign is encountered rarely on Britain's roads since the days of Beeching; they will be even rarer if and when the Serpell Report is implemented. I've not only crossed many of them, but been held up by trains at many of them in the CSSR. When I was in Czechoslovakia, on Thursday, 18 October, 1984, British Rail's corporate plan was announced, and denounced by the National Union of Railwaymen's Jimmy Knapp for the fact that it entailed not only massive reductions in services but the loss of 13,000 railway workers' jobs by 1990. Less than a month earlier I had also been in Czechoslovakia when the annual celebrations of Railway Workers' Day took place. Not only are railway workers honoured for their contribution to society—as are many other groups of workers—but the industry they work in, which currently accounts for three quarters of all domestic transport, is expanding. If Beeching had been a Czechoslovak, the only sacking would have been his own.

In addition to expansions and improvements in the railway network, about 50 million crowns each year is spent on housing, canteens, nursery schools and health and recreational facilities for railway workers and their families. Yet in 1985 in Britain, NUR members were striking against lost jobs and boycotting the anniversary celebrations of the Great Western Railway—with the exception of the Trans-Siberian and the Orient Express, the world's most famous railway, and older than the other two—as a result of the planned closure of British Rail's engineering workshops in Swindon and other towns.

In Czechoslovakia, the Skoda works in Plzen, one of the world's leading producers of electric railway engines, produced over 4,000 locomotives—half of them for export to the USSR—between the late 1950s and the beginning of the 1980s. It is still producing, and faces no threat of closure, any more than does the CKD works, producing diesel-electric locos in Prague. Equally safe are the jobs of workers at the CKD Tatra works in Smichov which produces a thousand trams every year.

If public transport in Czechoslovakia, unlike in Britain, is treated as a social service that should not be expected to be profitable, the same is true of another area much of which comes within the competence of local councils: housing. That's not to say that there's no private housing in Czechoslovakia—there is. Nor is it to say that there is no housing problem in Czechoslovakia—again, there definitely is. But it's a problem that's very different from the housing problem in Britain: nobody is homeless in Czechoslovakia, and, as with other issues, that's not simply

because the right to decent housing is laid down in Czechoslovakia's Constitution—though it certainly is.

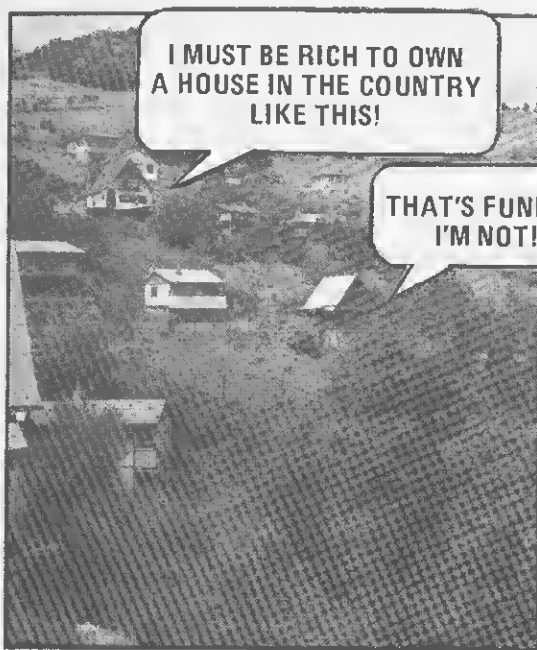
The main problem occurs in cities like Prague, where the demand for flats outstrips the supply—despite the fact that the supply included, for instance, the completion of 4,000 new flats in Prague 4 district in 1984 alone. In the same year, 91,000 new flats were completed in Czechoslovakia. The planned completion programme for 1985 was 107,000 homes. To see how this can be a problem—when you consider that council house building in Britain has come to a virtual standstill—it's necessary to realise that prior to the Second World War Czechoslovakia was nothing like the urbanised society that it is now.

However, two-thirds of the citizens of Prague 4 live in flats built since the Second World War; millions of crowns are being spent on replacing or renovating the remaining pre-war accommodation that is in many ways inadequate—without, for instance, bathrooms. Flats can, of course, be just as difficult to get, and with limited facilities at that, in London or any other of Britain's big cities; and unfurnished flats have effectively disappeared from the market altogether. To get any sort of rented accommodation in Britain these days it's necessary to pay through the nose.

That's one problem that doesn't exist in Czechoslovakia. Rents are dependent on the size of the accommodation and the facilities provided. A two-roomed flat including water rates, electricity charges, central heating, and with radio and television charges thrown in, will set you back about 500 crowns a month—or about one sixth of the average salary. Without some of the amenities I listed, charges can be less than five per cent of average pay. Even with all such facilities, rents are reduced for larger families. With one child you get a 5 per cent discount, with two a 15 per cent discount, with three—30 per cent, and with four or more—50 per cent.

You might be surprised to find, however, that very nearly half of all homes in Czechoslovakia are privately owned. They were (and are) built by families with the assistance of friends, neighbours and, of course, state-owned construction companies. The state contributes a grant of up to a year's average wages towards the construction of such homes. In 1983, for instance, the state savings bank made grants and loans towards the building of 11,000 homes in Czechoslovakia. "Do-it-yourself" housing may sound an amateurish and even ramshackle affair, but it simply isn't like that; it's really not that different from getting a house built in Britain by a private contractor—except that there's no private contractor involved to rob you.

Certainly as far as quality goes, anyone travelling through the villages of the Low Tatra mountains in Czechoslovakia as I have will probably think that they're seeing the country residences of Czechoslovakia's wealthier citizens. They're not. When I asked to whom such houses belonged, I got answers such as "Members of that co-operative farm on



Privately-owned weekend and holiday homes

the hill", or "Mainly workers from the local factory". (Mind you, such people, particularly co-operative farmers in Slovakia, may well qualify as "wealthier citizens", come to think of it.)

As far as home ownership goes, it's far preferable to Wimpey and Barratt—unless you can afford the sort of mock-Georgian mansion Barratt home bought by the Thatchers in the summer of 1985. (And though they may not be Chequers, nearly one in ten families in Czechoslovakia have small self-built second homes in the country, where they spend weekends and holidays away from the bustle of the cities.) Of the non-private half of housing, about three-quarters is state or council-built; the rest are mainly co-operatively-owned flats. The state contributes about 90,000 crowns towards the building of each co-operative flat; to get one, you need to pay an amount roughly equivalent to a quarter of its value as a share in the co-op, and thereafter charges that are effectively a rent. But you'll have to join the queue; there are more applicants than places. The best way is to get a job with an enterprise with shares in a housing co-operative. If you're the sort of worker they particularly need, they'll get you a place, loan you the money for the share, and, if you stay with them long enough, write the loan off altogether.

But whatever sort of housing you live in in Czechoslovakia, one thing is certain: it's massively subsidised by the state. Many people (usually mortgage holders) think the same is true of council housing in Britain.

Yet according to a well-argued article in the *Morning Star* of 28 September, 1984, by Flo Keyworth, the average council tenant is now receiving no subsidy whatsoever (and in any case, the main "subsidy" has always been that paid by councils to the finance companies in the way of interest.)

If, in Britain, transport and housing are not considered by the Government to be social services worthy of subsidy, no-one has yet suggested that the National Health Service should make a profit—though Norman Fowler may yet get around to it. But there are certainly cuts, for all the denials by the Government; Norman Fowler once went so far as to include only those beds in hospitals entirely closed in his equations, thus producing a picture of more hospital beds under the Tories. In fact, when reductions in beds in continuing hospitals were included, the figure was a decrease. There are well over 120,000 hospital beds in Czechoslovakia, with about 80,000 more in other health care establishments; this figure moves in only one direction—up. Tens of billions of crowns are spent annually on new hospitals; in 1983 the figure was 24,000 million crowns. And the beds that I'm writing about, at least in Most's hospital, are in "wards" with a maximum of four beds to a room—certainly not overcrowded.

Czechoslovakia has about 55,000 doctors. This ratio of doctors to population is, at 1:280, one of the highest in the world, and certainly higher than in Britain. By the end of the current five-year plan, it will have improved still further, to 1:273. In the same five-year-plan, an extra 31,000 staff will be taken on by the Czechoslovak health service. Neither this fact, nor the wage increases given in the health service in October 1984 will be used as an excuse for cuts in other areas, as with the doctors' and nurses' pay award in Britain in 1985, paid for by negating the supposed one per cent (!) planned increase in real spending on health. The only cuts in Czechoslovakia's health service are made by surgeons.

In addition to the network of about 240 hospitals, there are numerous polyclinics. Over 2,500 of these are attached to large-scale workplaces, and specially equipped to deal with specific problems that might arise there. Shortly before I visited the Slovnaft petrochemical works outside Bratislava, a new polyclinic had been opened there, paid for out of Slovnaft funds. It is a multi-storey building with dental, dermatological, gynaecological, psychiatric, surgical, X-ray and other departments. It also has baths, a swimming pool and massage rooms—in fact, apart from the absence of natural mineral springs, it could count as one of Czechoslovakia's many spas.

Though not part of the health service, Czechoslovakia has many spas where people spend holidays or recuperate from illnesses. The largest and best-known is Karlovy Vary—world-renowned in the old days under its German name of Carlsbad. It's a very attractive town and I'm sure the waters from its ten main springs are very good for you. It's nothing



Becherovka, the "eleventh spring" at the spa town of Karlovy Vary, and my favourite. There's nothing like it at Bath, Leamington, Harrogate or even Cheltenham

to boast of that I preferred the spa's "eleventh spring": Becherovka, or "Becher's Carlsbad Liqueur", devised by and named after David Becher, the 18th century doctor who first chemically analysed the spa's mineral waters.

One particular part of the body (or two parts, rather) for which spa treatment might be particularly useful is the kidneys, particularly in a country so fond of beer (and Becherovka). The hospital in Most had recently opened a kidney dialysis unit when I visited it; it was at that time dealing with ten patients, though the introduction of further kidney machines was intended to increase that to thirty or forty.

Within a few days of my visit to the hospital, five women who owed their lives—and those of their subsequently-born children—to kidney transplants were in London's Trafalgar Square to launch a £1m appeal for more treatment of kidney disease on the NHS. They symbolically tossed a coin to represent the 50-50 chance that someone in Britain suffering from kidney failure has of getting treatment. In March of the same year the *Nursing Standard* reported the scandal of middle-aged and elderly kidney sufferers simply being left to die, and Royal College

of Nursing dialysis adviser Moureen White had stated that "we lag behind all other European countries"—21st in rank according to a *New Statesman* report of 4 May, 1985, which also revealed plans to privatise dialysis throughout Wales. Tory MPs had the incredible nerve to actually laugh in July 1985 when Michael Meacher MP accused health minister Kenneth Clarke of killing 1,000 kidney patients a year through lack of NHS provision.

None of this is intended to demonstrate that kidney disease is an automatic passport to the grave in Britain or that in Czechoslovakia everything in the garden (and the dialysis unit) is rosy. The point is that in Czechoslovakia things are getting better while in Britain they're getting worse. When the Most dialysis unit reaches the level of thirty patients, it will be providing dialysis for one person out of every 10,000 of the region's population: when it reaches forty, the ratio will be one in every 7,500. The current figure in Britain is 1:14,000.

Another growing part of Czechoslovakia's health service is the provision of creches and nurseries, although most of these are provided by the Ministry of Education. I discussed nurseries in the preceding chapter from the point of view of the freedom given to the parents, and particularly mothers; now let's look at them from the point of view of the kids.

An almost unbelievable 96 per cent of children in Czechoslovakia from their third birthday to entry into basic school benefit from nursery education. I was frankly amazed by the nursery school that I visited in Prague 4. It had two creches with forty two to three-year-olds and six nursery classes of thirty-five three to six-year-olds. It also had several cooks, cleaning and administrative staff. I was amazed, my interpreter was equally so by my protestation that I'd never seen anything like it in Britain. "But everybody goes to nurseries like this here," she told me. When I asked if this particular nursery school was an exceptional example, I was told that on the contrary it was only one of 101 such nurseries in the Prague 4 district, together with 45 creches. My own home city of Bristol, with a population half as big again as that of Prague 4, has seventeen nursery schools and ten day nurseries provided by the local education and social services departments.

Yet according to the official press release referring to the opening of two new nursery schools (plus five schools) in Prague 4 in 1984, it was stated that "the capacity is still not sufficient"! Admittedly, as the district's housing estates expand, facilities will have to expand with them; in the past, flats have been built and occupied without all local amenities—shops, schools, clinics—being completed. This is a situation that councils nowadays try to avoid.

In the nursery itself, as well as all the mod cons you could hope for, there were plenty of toys for the children. Children being what they are, though, are often happy with less, and one group outside were busy chalking all over the path in a grassy play area. This doesn't fit in with



Yet more nursery kids in yet another different "uniform"—drawing up plans of battle?

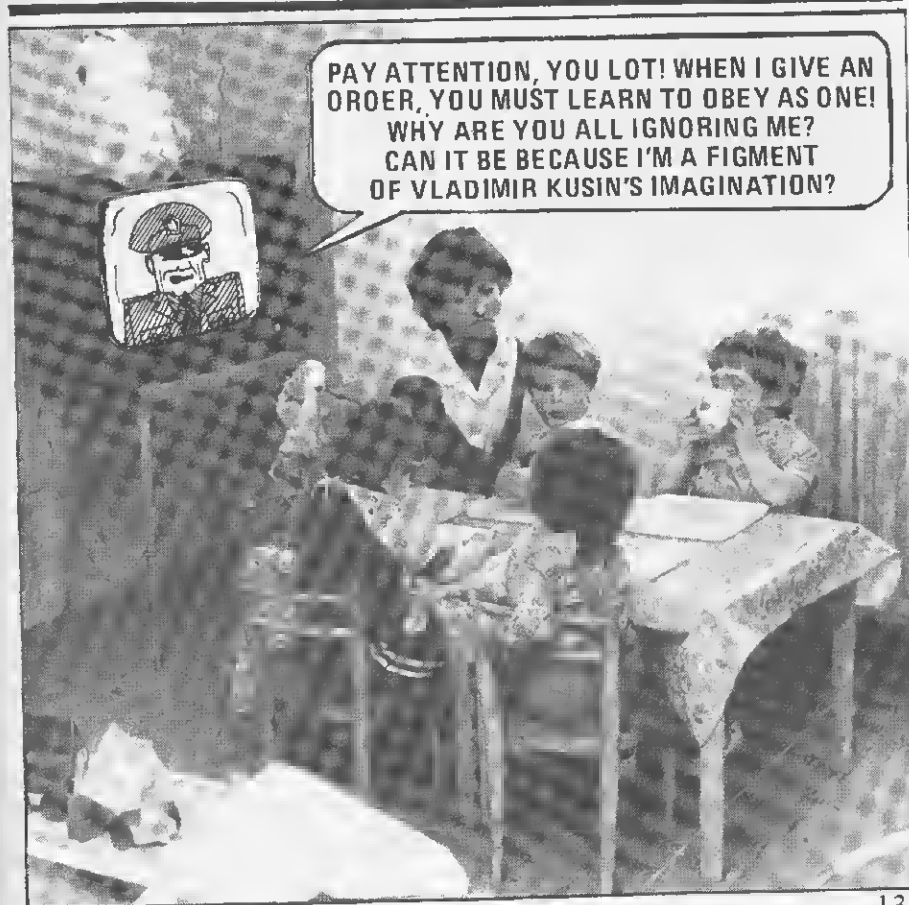
the regimented sort of behaviour some people would have you believe is the norm in nurseries in socialist countries; and even I was surprised to see that one of the ringleaders of the chalk-in was one of the teachers!

When I met the children, they had all just returned from a film show; in their dungarees and blouses, especially with their woolly hats, it was practically impossible to distinguish boys from girls; but one that I saw pushing and rocking a doll's pram was definitely a boy. I asked if this—and the unisex use of the toy cookers and ironing boards included among the nursery's toys—was common. I was assured that not only was that so, but that in some cases the boys were more interested—a good sign for the future.

Another good sign is one that apparently seems a bad one to the oft-quoted (by me) Mr Kusin:

"At the softer end of the effort (in kindergartens), the idea of collectiveness (not quite the same as 'teamwork') was singled out as being worthy of being inculcated into three-to-five year olds."
(Kusin, page 204)

This may seem sinister to Vladimir Kusin. But nobody who's ever watched "Sesame Street", with its laudable emphasis on the benefits of co-operation, might well see "collectiveness" as the same thing—and the Sesame Street viewers are in the main the same age as the Czechoslovak kids who Mr Kusin probably thinks are being turned into ant-like automata. (In just the same way, Tories in Britain fulminate against those primary schools practising "peace studies". Basically lessons in how to be tolerant and get along together, these are presented by their opponents as one-sided brainwashing by Soviet-duped, CND-fanatic teachers.)



When the children that I met in the nursery school enter school, it'll be a changing one. In 1984 the school-leaving age was raised from fifteen to sixteen; in Britain the following year, leaders of the National Association of Head Teachers were incredibly advocating the same change—only in reverse—for Britain. It's understandable that some fifth-formers in Britain resent their final year in what seems a pointless education system with no job to follow it. In Czechoslovakia's different circumstances, only two per cent of fifteen-year-olds previously left basic education to enter unskilled work. Under the new law that took effect on 1 September, 1984, they will not be permitted to do so.

Basic education now ends after eight years instead of nine—at fourteen—and all pupils are not to take a secondary course bringing the total schooling to at least ten years. The fact that this will be divided into 20 per cent "gymnasias" or "grammar schools", usually leading to university, 20 per cent vocational schools producing mainly technical workers (both schools taking the total schooling to twelve years); and 60 per cent into apprentice schools, with courses between two and four years, may sound a little like our not-yet-defunct pre-comprehensive system. But it should be remembered that the division takes place not at 11 but at 14, and that it will be possible to move on to university from any of the three types of education (or indeed to guaranteed paid employment).

Another difference with Britain is the total absence of the private sector in education, the most discriminatory feature in our mode of entry to university. Entry to university in Britain, with theoretical free access, is actually largely determined by social class. But then the same is true in Czechoslovakia, though in a rather different way. Again, who better to make it sound sinister than Mr Kusin:

"Working-class children who could prove political loyalty or at least absence of disloyalty in their families had their entry facilitated by a points system which gave them automatic credits to the extent of one-fifth of the maximum number of points achievable."
(Kusin, page 93)

Forget the wool-over-your-eyes nonsense about "political loyalty"—what he really means is "practically any working-class child". The rest is effectively true. Of course academic ability is the first priority when deciding who can have a university place (and there are about 150,000 of them) but care is also taken that the university population is representative of society as a whole. No intellectual elite will develop in Czechoslovakia, where university education is "biased" in favour of the vast majority of the population: the workers and co-operative farmers.

If you think that's unfair discrimination, consider the situation in Britain: Labour's education spokesman Giles Radice in a parliamentary debate in 1985 said that, as far as universities in Britain are concerned,

"Fifty per cent of their intake comes from fee-paying schools, which represent only 10 per cent of the school population." Even I hadn't realised the extent of the disparity, which has been getting worse under the Tories. If it's a choice between discrimination that gives half the places to a tiny elite minority, or "discrimination" that gives 60 per cent to the children of working people, I'll go for the latter every time.

I SAY, HENRY, DID YOUR PARENTS
HAVE TO PROVE THEIR
POLITICAL LOYALTY BEFORE
YOU CAME UP TO OXFORD FROM ETON?

THANK HEAVENS, NO, GILES!
IT COULD HAVE BEEN DOGGY—
AFTER ALL, MUMMY ONCE
VOTED FOR THE SGP!



Having said something about provision for young people from the cradle up, I'd better say a few words about not the grave so much as retirement. (Though in Czechoslovakia, life expectancy at 67 for men and 74 for women is practically identical with Britain's at 68 and 74, Czechoslovaks have a longer retirement to enjoy.)

I've already said that men in Czechoslovakia retire at 60 and women at 57 or earlier. The pensions they receive are dependent on the number of years worked, with a basic pension of 50-60 per cent of wages payable for 25 years in work (including care of small children) and additional percentages for each year on top of that. Someone who worked from the age of 18 to 60 is entitled to a pension of 67 per cent of their average pay. That average is determined by either the last five or the last ten years worked, whichever is higher, which makes Britain's old age pensions look pretty sick. With other benefits, the maximum pension payable is 90 per cent of wages; and of course more pensioners continue working while in receipt of their pensions. All pensions are tax-free and, as with child benefit and sickness benefit, non-contributory—which again makes our own present system, and the semi-privatised version being foisted on us by the Tories, look pretty sick.

And speaking of looking sick, sickness benefit in Czechoslovakia is 60 per cent of average net pay for those in employment less than a year, rising to 90 per cent for those in employment fourteen years or more. If you're going to get sick, better do it somewhere like Czechoslovakia where sick pay is high, where all medical treatment is free in an expanding health service, and where you can walk back into your job after two years' off sick with no problem. But as the emphasis of Czechoslovakia's health service is on prevention, they'd rather you didn't get sick in the first place!



*Czech/Slovak for "good morning"; **Hungarian for "good morning"; ***Welsh for "good morning"; ****English for "I'm sorry but we English are notoriously ignorant of the languages of other peoples, even those with whom we share an island."

Chapter 9: Minority rules

Before I ever visited Slovakia, I had read in Kidron and Segal's "New State of the World Atlas" that on the national question in Czechoslovakia, with a minority of 30 per cent Slovaks, there are "grievances but no organised movement". Since reading that I have visited Slovakia, and what I found there leads me to doubt whether Messrs Kidron and Segal have ever done so. The reason there's no "organised movement" is the absence of the "grievances" imagined by the two writers.

Leaving aside any credence I might (or might not) have given to such "grievances", I was certainly interested to see how the question of separate nations living together in one state was handled in the CSSR: no doubt the attitude would be very different to the complete absence of national rights in multinational Britain.

It was even more different than I had imagined. As soon as I asked about the question when I arrived in the Slovak capital of Bratislava, people began to tell me about the rights enjoyed by Hungarians and

Ukrainians within Slovakia. It became clear to me that while Slovakia accounts for only one-third of the inhabitants of the CSSR, the last thing that Slovaks think of themselves as is a national minority; in some cases, Slovakia was considered such an important part of the federation that I was surprised no-one had yet proposed a change of name to Slovakoczechia!

It wasn't always so. Under the Austro-Hungarian Empire Slovakia was a poor and backward country. From the beginning of this century to the foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, Slovakia consequently lost 500,000 of its population. The situation of Slovakia improved little with the formation of the Republic, and the next two decades saw the loss of a further 200,000 emigrants. The continuing economic backwardness of Slovakia and the absence of adequate national rights within the Republic unfortunately provided fertile ground for separatist trends, and provided a limited amount of popular support for the "independent" Slovak State set up by the Nazis.

The following experience to 1944 effectively removed such support, and the Slovak National Uprising of that year was carried out with the participation of the Czechs (and people from all over the world, including Britain) and in a spirit of anti-fascist unity with the Czech people. After the defeat of fascism, and more so after the 1948 socialist revolution, Slovakia developed rapidly to an equal status with the Czech lands as far as income and population are measured. In 1937, Slovakia accounted for only 18 per cent of the Republic's national income, a figure which had only risen to 19 per cent by 1948. By 1983, however, this had risen to 30 per cent—roughly in line with the proportion of the population—and a similar increase can be seen in industrial production. In 1937: 8 per cent; in 1948: 13 per cent; in 1983: 29.2 per cent.

None of this came out of thin air; much was provided by the Czech peoples. As Mr Matejka told me at the Government offices in Bratislava:

"We're very thankful for the help offered by the Czech nations in the period of industrialisation in Slovakia. It meant they had to tighten their belts, but together we managed to start to increase industrial development and the standard of living, thanks to resources provided to Slovakia by the Czechs to organise development on a dynamic scale."

"From 1948 to 1984, our industrial production has increased 28 times over; 960 billion crowns have been invested in the development of Slovakia, in industry, building, transport, agriculture and so on; in the chemical industry production has increased 70 times over. Before, Slovakia had only light industry; now we have 360 major plants employing over 1,000 workers each in heavy industry."

That's a particularly impressive record when you compare it to the position of a major national minority in Britain—the Welsh. Wales, one of the main birthplaces of heavy industry in Britain and a large section of our former industrial backbone has now become one of the worst run-down areas in all British industry, and one of the worst areas for unemployment: Slovakia's story since 1948 in reverse.

But if economically the development of Slovakia compares favourably with the decline within Britain of the economies of the minority nations, political developments are even more startling. While even after 1948 there was not full recognition of the national aspirations of the Slovaks and other minorities, this situation was remarkably rectified by the "Constitutional Act on the Czechoslovak Federation" which became law on January 1, 1969. Under this, Czechoslovakia became a federal nation in which the Czech Socialist Republic and the Slovak Socialist Republic are absolutely equal partners, irrespective of their relative size.

In the Federal Assembly, there are two houses: the Chamber of the People, with 200 deputies, and the Chamber of the Nations, with 150. The former is elected by the whole people, though the National Front does its best to see that different nationalities are approximately reflected in its composition. The 150 places of the Chamber of the Nations, however, are divided equally between the two republics of the federation: seventy-five each. As no Act can be passed in Czechoslovakia without the consent of both Chambers, this effectively gives Slovakia a veto over any legislation it doesn't favour.

Imagine what this would mean in a British context. It would mean two Houses of Parliament, both elected. Instead of the archaic and feudal House of Lords we would have a Chamber equally divided between representatives of the English, Welsh and Scots (I'm assuming that by the time of such a development Britain would have recognised it had no right to rule over any section of the Irish people). No legislation could be passed that was objected to be the representatives of one nationality would be unlikely to be passed—though the involvement of three nations would make a somewhat different situation than in federal Czechoslovakia. Some English people might see such an arrangement as undemocratic; the Scots and Welsh might well see it as a welcome—though belated—recognition of their rights as nations after years of suppression and diktat from an English-orientated Whitehall.

But is such a form equality of nations in legislation no more than formal? The raising of the economic level of Slovakia to equal that of the Czech lands suggests it's real as well. A similar situation exists in education. At one time, I was told, there were only 2,000 students in all of Slovakia. In the academic year of 1983/4, there were over 53,000. Of these, nearly 50,000 were ethnic Slovaks. While Slovaks represent just over 30 per cent of the total population of the CSSR, in that year

their share of university places was 34.5 per cent. They've come a long way.

This is part of the result of the "Constitutional Act concerning the Status of Ethnic Groups in the CSSR", passed at the same time as the other act referred to above, and in some ways even farther-reaching. This Act guarantees the members of the German and Polish minorities (mainly in the Czech lands) and the Hungarian and Ukrainian minorities (mainly in Slovakia) the following rights:

- "a) the right to education in their own language,*
- "b) the right to all-round cultural development,*
- "c) the right to use their language in official communications in areas inhabited by the respective ethnic groups,*
- "d) the right to associate in ethnic cultural and social organisations,*
- "e) the right to their own press and information in their own language."*

It further grants citizens the right to decide their own nationality and outlaws any discrimination in political, economic and social life because of national origin.

None of our laws on race relations is so positive as that. But again, is it simply a question of paper provision not matched by reality? Not in my experience. I mentioned in Chapter 1 my visit to a mainly Hungarian farming town to the south of Bratislava. (Incidentally, Hungarian communities occur mainly along Slovakia's southern border, for obvious geographical reasons, and tend normally to be in the more fertile, and therefore more prosperous areas. The obviously productive dark earth I saw in the region testified to that.) Shortly after our arrival in the town square a loudspeaker started up, and, with the prejudices none of us ever completely gets rid of, I had delusions of 1984-style political harangues, and asked my Slovak interpreter for a translation. He couldn't furnish one: the announcements were in Hungarian. (When the Slovak version duly arrived, it turned out to be a rundown of the forthcoming week's social events—hardly sinister.)

The schoolgirls we spoke to in the square, though obviously close friends, were equally divided between the local Slovak school and the local Hungarian school. All the signs in the shop windows and inside the shops were bilingual in Hungarian and Slovak—and despite this being a fairly small town, the range of goods was just as broad (and of course with identical pricing) as anything you'd see in Prague and Bratislava. Most of the album covers in the record shop window were in Hungarian.

Try and imagine a similar situation in Wales: not only would we have the token recognition of the native language in the bilingual naming of towns on motorway and road signs, but bilingual signs in all shop windows, on all official buildings and notices—Welsh would be

everywhere. If it's argued that most Welsh people speak English fluently, it has to be added that most Hungarian citizens of Slovakia speak Slovak fluently; the use of their native language is still encouraged. If it's argued that there's no comparison because most Welsh people don't speak Welsh in any case, that's nothing for the English to brag about. Less than a century ago, the majority of people even in South Wales spoke Welsh as a first language; it was deliberately stamped out. Pupils unable to speak English in schools were forced to stand in corners wearing dunces' caps. It is only in recent years that any respect for and recognition of the importance of the Welsh language, and Welsh culture has been expressed in Government and the education system. (As far as Scotland is concerned, not only was Gaelic deliberately—though not completely—stamped out, it was once illegal to speak of "Scotland"; the only acceptable term was "North Britain". No wonder they rebelled more than once!)

In the education system in Slovakia it's all very different. A total of 16,084 children were in nursery schools where the language used is Hungarian in the school year 1983/4—or roughly the proportion of Hungarians in the population. A much smaller number—2,025—were in nurseries where the language was Ukrainian; as the Ukrainian minority is much smaller, this was equally representative. The same picture applies throughout the education system, and it also applies to the small Polish minority in the Czech Lands.

While these three minorities form distinct ethnic communities, there is a small German minority whose members live dispersed in several parts of North and West Bohemia. Nevertheless, the Cultural Union of Czechoslovak Citizens of German Nationality is a part of the broad-based National Front.

The minorities are well catered for when it comes to information, entertainment and culture. The Communist Party of Slovakia publishes a daily newspaper—*Uj Sjo*—in Hungarian with a print run of 100,000 (and more at weekends); the Cultural Union of Hungarian Workers in Czechoslovakia (CSEMADOK) brings out the weekly magazine *Het* with a run of 28,000; the Slovak Union of Women publishes 35,000 copies of its Hungarian language magazine *No* each week. There are also sixteen other centrally-produced magazines and periodicals, in addition to tens of thousands of copies of smaller local publications in Hungarian. There are also five periodicals published in Ukrainian. In addition to all this, publications from Hungary and the Ukraine are widely available.

The same applies to books: some dozen million crowns each year are spent on importing Hungarian books and magazines—and considering how cheap such items are in socialist countries, that's a hell of a lot of literature. Not that Slovakia's Hungarians are lax when it comes to book production themselves. Every year Hungarian writers in Slovakia are responsible for about two thirds of the fifty-odd books pub-

lished in Hungarian by the Madach publishing house in Bratislava, with print runs of up to 400,000. Numerous textbooks are also produced in Hungarian by the Slovak educational publishing house.

One day we may see a similar situation in Britain with Welsh—although Gaelic may have been driven back to such an extent that a similar resurgence may not be possible. It's not a question of saving dying languages for the sake of it—and Welsh is in any case now spreading under its own steam. The few Welsh programmes that appear on our S4C and HTV Wales television channels are only a pale reflection of what could be.

It has to be admitted that only the smallest amount of television broadcasting is in the minority languages in Czechoslovakia. But that "admission" has to be balanced by the fact that Hungarian, Ukrainian, Polish and German (including from West Germany and Austria) television channels can all be picked up in Czechoslovakia. However, in Slovakia, radio broadcasts 35 hours a week in Hungarian, often on matters of specific interest to Hungarians in Slovakia. Prior to the Second World War there were only a few news programmes; this has since expanded to take in current affairs, entertainment, cultural and general information broadcasting. Ukrainian is broadcast for 1½ hours each week.

Nor is the cultural heritage of the minorities represented by the equivalent of one Eisteddfod a year. CSEMADOK chairman Zoltan Sido, himself educated in a Hungarian-language school, told me of the numerous festivals that take place every year as part of keeping Hungarian culture alive in Slovakia. CSEMADOK (membership: 80,000) organises annual festivals of song and dance in Gombasek; an annual festival in Komarno named after the town's native Hungarian writer Jokai, with drama, poetry and prose; an annual festival of amateur folk groups in Zeliezovce; and three amateur song festivals each year in Galanta, named after the composer Kodaly. There are other festivals such as the Melody pop festival, and others on a less regular basis. Funding for all these is provided by the Ministry of Culture.

These, you understand, are just the Hungarian events—though of course non-Hungarians, as well as visitors from abroad, most notably Hungary itself, participate in them. There are over 500 amateur theatre and folk song and dance groups under the umbrella of CSEMADOK. One amateur Hungarian choir has represented Czechoslovakia at folk festivals in the British Isles, at Middlesbrough and Cork, where they distinguished themselves by winning first and third prizes. But all this is only a part of the cultural and folk heritage of Slovakia. There are 12,000 amateur cultural groups in Slovakia, with a membership of about 200,000 people—out of a population of five million—about 1,300 of these being folk song and dance groups. The professional Slovak



Not so traditional—a Hungarian rock festival in Slovakia

Folk Art Ensemble has performed in nearly fifty countries around the world since its formation in 1949. No-one could seriously suggest that the varying cultures of the different peoples of Czechoslovakia are allowed to fall into decline, let alone are suppressed. And I haven't even mentioned the Czechs!

How, then, about the democratic representation of minorities at the level of, say, the Slovak National Council, the governing body of the whole of Slovakia? I've already suggested that at federal level a balance between nationalities is obtained in the Chamber of the people, and that Slovakia and the Czech lands have equal representation in the Chamber of the Nations. Article 2 of the Constitutional Act on ethnic groups states that:

"The ethnic groups shall be represented in the representative bodies and other elected organs appropriately according to their numerical strength."

Quite apart from the fact that the Slovak National Council itself is a far more effective form of representation of a nation than the Scottish Assembly that the people of Scotland voted for but were denied by Westminster, within the council itself the national minorities of Slovakia are well represented. In the Council elected in 1981 and due for re-election in 1986, there were 130 deputies of Slovak nationality, sixteen of Hungarian nationality, three Ukrainians and one Czech. With nearly eleven per cent of elected deputies, the Hungarian minority

was somewhat over-represented as were the Ukrainians, who account for about one per cent of the population but two per cent of the deputies; The deputy chairman is a Hungarian, as are the Minister of Works, the deputy minister of trade and other holders of leading posts.

I discussed in an earlier chapter the way the National Front (the secretary of which in Slovakia is a Hungarian) goes about ensuring proper representation at all levels for various groups in Czechoslovakia, including the different nationalities. To some people it might seem a mechanical way of going about it; but the results speak for themselves. The people of Slovakia as a whole are more than adequately represented at federal level—and the president himself is a Slovak; in such circumstances the Federal Assembly is obliged to appoint a Czech as vice-president, and vice-versa. And at Slovak national level, national minorities are represented at a level that puts Britain to shame.

Britain has millions of citizens of Afro-Caribbean and Asian origin; we are still waiting for our first post-war black MP. The right to education in your native language, and the educationally pursued and state-backed right to your own culture and heritage are paid little more than lip-service; large areas of Britain are represented in Parliament by people with no real link with local people. Even a Scot like Teddy Taylor, once Scottish Secretary, lost his Scottish seat, such is Tory contempt for the national aspirations of the Scots people, and had to scuttle off to safe Tory Southend to find another.

In Czechoslovakia, and perhaps most particularly in Slovakia, the respect and support of the people as a whole, and their representative bodies, for the rights of the national minorities and the continuation of their languages and cultures has an effect that is not centrifugal but unifying. The more their rights are respected, the more the Hungarian and Ukrainian minorities will feel themselves citizens of Slovakia and the Czechoslovak federation. Such an attitude isn't bowing before nationalism but a sign of genuine internationalism.

"Grievances but no organised movement", Messrs Kidron and Segal? You've got to be joking.

Chapter 10:

Miner differences

When, during the British miners' strike of 1984-85, groups of striking miners and their families were invited to take holidays in Czechoslovakia and other socialist countries, the *Daily Telegraph* managed to find something sinister about the miners' gratitude to their hosts. "Parties of striking miners and their families were invited 'on holiday' to Russia and Czechoslovakia: they had to sing for their supper. They addressed numerous rallies and made broadcasts . . ." wrote professional anti-Communist Blake Baker on 22 April, 1985. It never seems to have occurred to Mr Baker that they might have been genuinely grateful, or that they might have been genuinely surprised and impressed by what they discovered in Czechoslovakia, particularly as far as their own industry is concerned.

But as well as the similarities—and workers in the same industry from whatever country will find they have much in common—there are indeed striking differences between coalmining in Britain and

Czechoslovakia; or perhaps in the case of the latter, "non-striking" differences, in that Czechoslovak miners would hardly consider it necessary to go on strike in order to protect jobs or maintain the living standards provided by their wages.

Mr Baker no doubt finds it difficult to believe that miners in any other country could actually be better off than the dwindling number employed in an industry presided over by Daily Telegraph pin-up boy Ian MacGregor. He also probably shares the view put forward by Tory minister Kenneth Clarke on BBC2 on 7 March 1985, when discussing the National Union of Mineworkers' opposition to pit closures on purely "economic" grounds. Their position, he said, was "a demand not conceded by any country—even any Eastern European country—that pits should not be closed as long as there are any reserves." Perhaps Mr Clarke was excluding Czechoslovakia—though I doubt it; despite the CSSR's central position in Europe the Kenneth Clarks of this world invariably place it in the East. If not, he's got it painfully wrong.

When, in October 1984, I discussed the question of "uneconomic pits" with union and management representatives at the Nosek pit near Kladno, Central Bohemia, the response I got was one of amusement: "But this pit is 'uneconomic'," deputy director Stepan Matula told me. "We lose 140 million crowns here each year. But it can't be measured in terms of cash or profit. It's one of our nation's natural resources, and as a basic industry it needs to be subsidised."

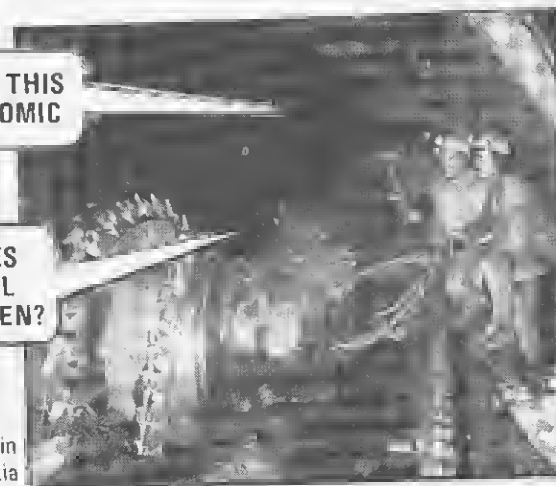
The pit, I was told, was well past its peak of production, which had been reached a decade earlier, with an annual production of some ten million tonnes. Production had now fallen to about a twelfth of that level, at 800,000 tonnes per annum. Yet in that same decade, the workforce at the pit had fallen by less than a fifth—from 2,800 to 2,300. One reason for this was that, despite continued introduction of sophisticated mechanisation, much of the remaining coal was in small relatively inaccessible seams that the large machines could not reach.

I discovered this for myself on a visit below. I didn't see the mechanised faces; these were up to three kilometres away from the main shaft, and the limited time available wouldn't have allowed us to get there. But I did meet miners at the end of a narrow tunnel removing coal from an even narrower seam by small hand-held drill and shovel—an activity that our National Coal Board would doubtless have considered "uneconomic". This was just one part of the pit's reserve that both management and unions were united in wanting to see totally exhausted before any pit closure takes place.

Final exhaustion was expected to take place by the end of the century, and only then would the pit close. Some of the pit's miners would by then be retired (and miners usually retire at 55 in Czechoslovakia); others would all be guaranteed jobs either by

I HEARD TELL THIS
PIT'S UNECONOMIC

SO WHERE DOES
ALL THIS COAL
COME FROM, THEN?



Investment in new machinery in
coalmining in Czechoslovakia

retraining or by transfer to a new mine of which the main shaft was about to be sunk about ten miles away at Slany.

But if the Nosek pit is eventually to close, there's certainly going to be no reduction of Czechoslovakia's 200,000-strong mining workforce on a nation-wide scale. On the contrary, the 1986-1990 five-year plan envisages an expansion of the coalmining industry and an increase in its workforce. Whatever the necessary subsidisation, Czechoslovakia has every intention of making the greatest possible use of its limited natural resources.

It hasn't always been the case—even since the establishment of socialism. Stepan Matula told me that one the "reforms" being pushed for by those involved in the economic side of government in 1968 had been the closure of "uneconomic" pits, though subsequently this wasn't put into practice. He likened the plan to the current NCB plan for Britain's mining industry: "Some people said that oil was cheaper, and that pits should be closed. Even at government level, some officials argued that the pits in this area should be closed down, the miners paid unemployment benefit and cheap oil imported."

Everyone knows what happened to "cheap oil" in the 1970s. "Now energy from coal is cheaper than from oil, even allowing for the subsidy," added Stepan Matula, "and there's a lot more coal in the world than there is oil." It's unfortunate—or a lot worse—that the powers that be in mining in Britain prefer the short-lived approach of some in Czechoslovakia in 1968 to the much farther-sighted one that has since prevailed.

It's interesting to note that 1968's deputy prime minister with responsibility for the economy, Ota Sik, an advocate of a mixed, market economy of the sort that would have closed the pits around Kladno, departed to live a comfortable life in the west. When he spoke

at the Zurich Economic Symposium in April 1970, he attacked socialism so strongly that the liberal economist J K Galbraith said that he felt more of a Marxist than the "Marxist" Sik. The following year Sik contributed an article to *Problems of Communism*, the US Government periodical published by the "International Communications Agency" (rearrange the initials and you'll discover who's really behind it). Perhaps Ian MacGregor should consider hiring Mr Sik.

But if Czechoslovak miners don't face the threat of mass closure of "uneconomic" pits and thousands of redundancies, and aren't told that too much coal is being produced to sell profitably (and open-cast mining of brown coal in North Bohemia exceeded its target in 1983), then what of their conditions of work and their wages? I've never been in a mine in Britain, and saw only a limited area when I visited the Nosek pit. I was told of various precautions against dust and other hazards, the visits to spas and sanatoria arranged free or at a fraction of cost for miners ("working underground can't improve your health," safety officer Milous Wiesnev told me) of the hygiene facilities and the free snack lunches introduced seven years earlier, of the eight-hour shifts only six hours of which miners are actually expected to spend working. But I'm not in a position to compare the situation with that in Britain, so I'll have to leave that to NUM member Nick Platek from the Midlands:

"I don't know if there is a miner in England who will believe us



Had MacGregor tried to do to Czechoslovakia's coal mines what he's done to Britain's, he'd not have got a knighthood — just the bum's rush

when we talk about Czechoslovak miners' working conditions, and about how their work is appreciated. Our own reality is so different that it's hard to believe," he told Milan Gruber of the CSSR's Orbis Press Agency.

The same reporter was told by Derek Bromley of Coventry: "We know that if we show the same firmness and solidarity that Czech miners showed in the past, the time will come when we shall be able to live as well as they do today."

That sounds like a favourable response to conditions in Czechoslovakia's mining industry from people better equipped to gauge them than I am, but it also brings in the question of wages. It has to be admitted that in strict terms of official exchange rates, the wages of Czechoslovak miners are less than those in Britain; but when the wage is taken together with all the benefits not included in the wage packet referred to in previous chapters, plus the bonus of guaranteed job security, it comes to a very large amount. And in straight cash terms, miners' wages are between 40 and 50 per cent higher than the average industrial wage in Czechoslovakia. In the CSSR, miners are where they should be in Britain and every other country: at the very top of the table of industrial earnings. When I asked young miners down the Nosek pit what their usual weekly pay was, they quoted figures at me that I don't actually recall—a coal mine isn't the best place for taking notes. But I do know that my interpreter on that occasion—a journalist—smiled ruefully at me and commented, "it's a lot more than I get!" How many of the journalists that spent so long vilifying the NUM during the heroic struggles of 1984 and 1985 could say the same?

But what of the "firmness and solidarity" of the Czechoslovak miners' past (not to mention present) referred to by Derek Bromley? I've said that miners in Czechoslovakia don't need to take strike action to protect jobs or to maintain their position in the wages league. Does that mean that they're a different breed from the militant miners of Yorkshire, Kent, Wales, Scotland and other parts of Britain?

Most definitely not. The days when miners in Czechoslovakia had to strike and struggle to maintain their most basic standards may be over, but they are by no means forgotten. An interesting example of this is the mining museum in Kladno—and its curator's husband is a working miner. The museum is dedicated not merely to the history of mining, the various techniques, with displays of implements, models of different pits throughout the ages, and the full-scale replica of a modern pit in its basement. Just as much of the museum is dedicated to the revolutionary struggles of the miners, the strikes of the 1920s and so on in the area that earned it the name "Red Kladno".

It's hardly the sort of permanent exhibition that you'd mount if you wanted your miners to forget their rebellious past and become docile accepters of the status quo. If miners in Czechoslovakia show a willing-

MINERS AND JOURNALISTS: RELATIVE POSITIONS IN WAGES LEAGUE



ness to accept the order of society in which they live, it's not out of any ignorance of the meaning of militancy. Miners in Czechoslovakia, whether in deep-mining or open-cast, are well aware of the struggles of the pre-socialist era that, in the fight against lay-offs in Most in 1932, for instance, left two miners dead and many more wounded by police bullets.

So I wasn't altogether surprised to find that at the time of my visit to the Nosck pit, following an earlier appeal from the union chairman at a short meeting, about 10,000 crowns had already been collected in the pit for the British miners, with contributions from miners, white-collar workers, canteen staff—with some putting 100-crown or even 500-crown notes into the collection box, and a telegram of support and best

wishes being sent from the pit to the British miners on holiday with their families in Czechoslovakia. The universality of the support comes partly from the fact that all employees of the pit—from canteen workers through miners and foremen right up to the director—are members of the Union of Mining and Power Industry Workers. The same sort of internationalism was shown in the unanimous resolution of support for the British miners passed at the 9th International Trade Union Conference of Miners and Workers in Energy held in Prague with the participation of an NUM delegation led by Peter Heathfield in October 1984.

Despite all this, it still comes as something of a surprise to find the unanimity of unions and management in support of a trade union struggle taking place a thousand miles away. The representatives of both "sides" of the industry that I met were following the dispute closely—and much information on it was available in the Czechoslovak media—and were eager to hear as much about it as they could, as well as insisting that I convey their best wishes to any striking miners that I should encounter on my return to Britain—which I had the pleasure of being able to do on a number of occasions.

Nor was the phenomenon of support from miners' wives something unknown in Czechoslovakia. Dr Vackova of the Czechoslovak Union of Women told me of the support given to miners by their wives in the Most strike in the 1930s and the strikes of the 1920s, of women standing literally as well as metaphorically shoulder to shoulder with their men in their struggles with the repressive forces of the state. Again when the mines were being nationalised in the period following the Second World War, the women joined their men to show that they backed their demand that their pits should become public property.

Some may choose to believe that the immense solidarity offered to the NUM by miners and other workers in Czechoslovakia and other socialist countries represented merely a Government-sponsored attempt to interfere in Britain's internal affairs. Anyone who knows the least bit of the history of Czechoslovakia's miners or has met any of their present-day miners will know differently.

Ian MacGregor, Peter Walker and Margaret Thatcher may think that the only way to run a mining industry is by putting profit first and leaving valuable natural resources buried. The miners of the CSSR know differently. Some may think that it is of no consequence that miners' jobs are lost by the thousands and their communities destroyed. The miners of the CSSR not only think differently, but their experience shows them that it need not be so. Some may say that miners have no divine right to be at the top of the wages league table; such a right may not come from God, but it is one that nobody in Czechoslovakia disputes.

Above all, some may resent the militant internationalist solidarity of miners everywhere. But it won't go away, and certainly not in

Czechoslovakia. Socialism's detractors may not want people to know that Czechoslovakia is one of the countries where miners are valued, respected, and guaranteed security. Too many of Britain's miners have seen it for themselves, and spread the word, for that cover-up ever to be completely successful.

Footnote to Arthur Scargill: the Nosek pit is named after Vaclav Nosek, a miner from a mining family in the Kladno region, a militant miners' leader, who after liberation at the end of the Second World War went on to be Home Secretary; another local miners' leader, Antonin Zapotocky, went on to become Prime Minister and later President of Czechoslovakia. There's hope for you yet, Arthur—and for the rest of us!

Three of a kind



Vaclav Nosek—from miner to miners' leader to Home Secretary



Antonin Zapotocky—from miner to miners' leader to Prime Minister to President



Arthur Scargill—from miner to miners' leader to... who can tell?

Afterword

When Czechoslovak press attache Josef Konecny appeared on the Channel 4 News "Comment" slot on 25th February 1985, he said that "Czechoslovakia is not the Iron Curtain country that it's sometimes thought to be." From his other remarks, it was clear that he didn't mean by this that the CSSR was anything other than a committed and loyal member of Comecon, the Warsaw Pact and the world socialist community. He was thinking, rather, of the false image of Czechoslovakia represented by some of the quotations that appear in the first part of this book. In the five minutes allotted to him, he did as good a job of refuting that false image, and of presenting some of the seldom-heard positive truths, as anyone could in so short a space of time.

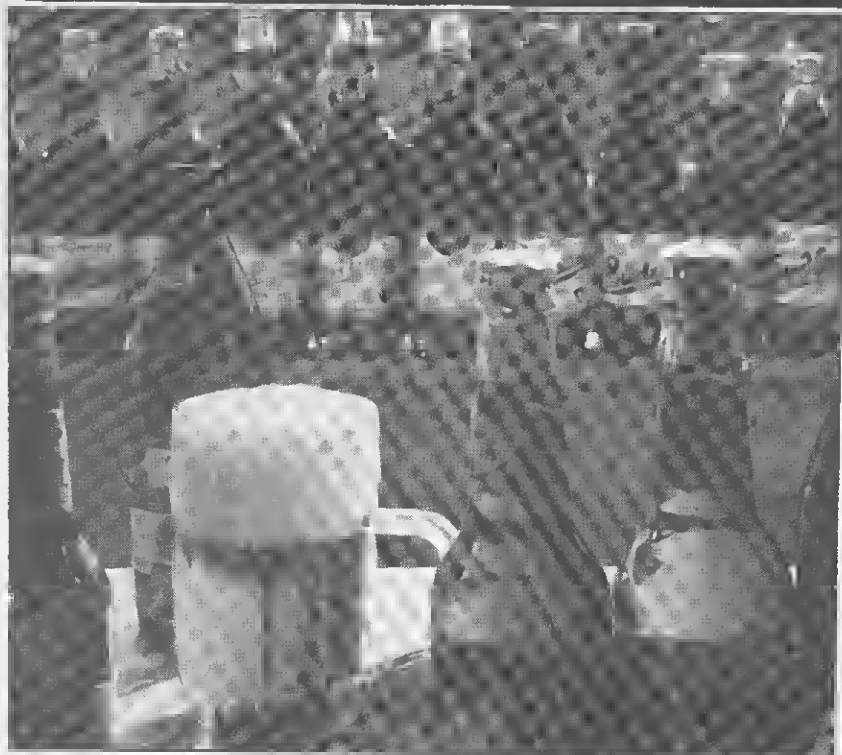
It's interesting to note that his appearance was "balanced" on 15 April of the same year by a "Comment" by emigrant Czech journalist Karel Kyncl, who had nothing good to say about the country he had chosen to leave. This is the famous "balance" of our media whereby every reference to the CSSR on British television for years previously had been in the same critical vein as Mr Kyncl's. The nearest thing I remember to objectivity (or just lack of outright hostility) prior to Josef Konecny's five-minute appearance, was an hour-long programme about television in Czechoslovakia about a decade earlier.

What Mr Kyncl didn't do was to repeat the challenge—or rather invitation—made to his viewers by Josef Konecny to visit the country and find out for themselves. For what Konecny also no doubt had in mind by his statement of the CSSR's not being an "Iron Curtain country" was that far from its being inaccessible, its borders are wide open to anyone wishing to find out the truth about it. Or, for that matter, for those who wish to experience the beauty of its mountains, its forests and lakes; its museums, its art galleries, its architecture, its music; its national character—or, I should say, its many national characters; its sense of history. Of all of these I have said practically nothing, to say only a little could not have given the real picture; to say all would have been a totally different book that I am hardly qualified to write. I have even said little of one of the Czechs' great glories, their beer, on which I might be slightly better qualified; millions from neighbouring countries probably visit the Bohemian part of Czechoslovakia because of this unique tourist attraction. And the

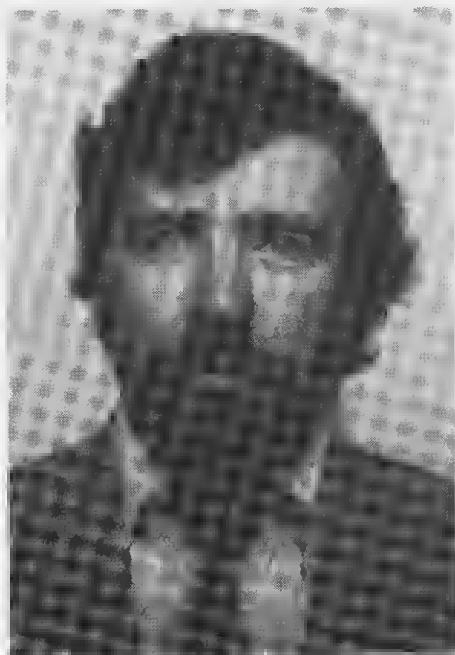
Czechs don't go by halves; when they describe their Plzensky Prazdroj (or Pilsner Urquell as it's marketed abroad) as "the best lager in the world", they feel no obligation to add the word "probably".

But for whatever reason you go there, if and when you visit Czechoslovakia, try not to remain confined to the "tourist traps"—though they're all worth a visit. But there is so much else to be seen in Czechoslovakia; its people, its social system—so different not only from ours but from the picture of it painted for us by our media; its progress.

Nearly five decades have passed since Neville Chamberlain wrote Czechoslovakia off as a faraway country of which we know little. There is now so much more to know, yet many still know just as little. For those who want to find out more; the development of the means of transport that has made the world smaller and more accessible has seen to it that Czechoslovakia is not so far away any more; the more people from Britain and the west that visit Czechoslovakia and its sister socialist countries, the closer we shall all be, not only to each other, but to a future of peace and progress.



Lager—probably the second greatest product of Czechoslovakia.(Socialism is the first.)



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Harney and Jones
119/121 Falcon Road, London, SW11 2PQ

ISBN: 0 946817 05 7
Price: £2.00

KC-546-103

